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ABSTRACT

This report is addressed to administrators in the field of correspondence education. In dealing with attrition, it suggests that it is possible to control the proportion of those who do not start after enrollment; it may be possible to reclaim those who fail an examination; and the proportion of those who drop out may be reduced. Beginning with a survey of opinions in the field, the report examines correspondence study and attrition from an international perspective. A third chapter describes a way to compare attrition problems across institutions by distinguishing stages on a continuum from "career counseling" through "issuance of certification." The following chapters describe the Preliminary Unit Pack (PUP) experiment. Faced with high attrition and increasing enrollment, initial resources (often 300 pages of books and notes) sent to applicants on enrolling, as well as the staff needed to organize this process, were becoming expensive. PUP was begun to determine non-starters early in the program stages. The initial pack of resources sent to enrollees was reduced in size and a response to this material was required prior to formal enrollment. Nine of 100 courses were chosen for the PUP experiment. A reduction of the non-starter rate, with consequent savings of administrative resources, was achieved. A major side effect was that PUP students submitted assignments faster than others. Nine recommendations are suggested to reduce attrition in correspondence education (DAG)

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A Quest for CONTROL of ATTRITION

from CORRESPONDENCE Study

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Volume I: TEXT

H. Greg. Wilson

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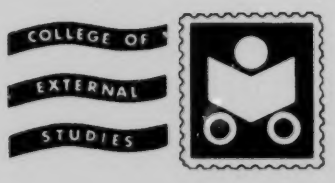

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A Quest for Control of Attrition from Correspondence Study
H.G.Wilson

A high degree of institutional organization is essential in planning correspondence study if it is to be economical and effective. The most significant intangible, and hence impediment to planning, is the unknown extent of future student wastage; the enrollees who do not submit any assignments, those who do but discontinue, and those who fail examinations but do not re-attempt. This project was partly an evaluation of an attempt to control student attrition, and partly an enquiry into other possible methods of attrition control in an open entry, free pacing system.

Enrolment and performance data were collected in respect of two hundred and eighty-four enrollees in eight business courses of a technical correspondence college in February 1975. One hundred and fifty-two of these had enrolled by a simple process of completing an enrolment form, whilst the remaining one hundred and thirty-two had undergone a compulsory form of initiation by submitting assignments with their enrolment forms. The starting proportion and pace of the latter group were significantly higher. Initiation appears to be a regulator of student commitment and, hence, of retention.

Applying tests to the sample, based upon a review of the literature, indicated little hope of discovery of attrition or retention predictors. Difficulty in comparing results of previous studies was experienced due to uncertainty as to terminology and methods of measurement.

1975/76
29/12/76

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PREFACE

Much has been written and even more said about student attrition; about those who enrol but do not start their studies, those who start but never get to the exam stage, and those who fail an exam and do not return to their studies. Most of what has been said is logical and sensible, although some is just wishful thinking. Little of what has been written can be put into practice by administrators in the field of correspondence education. Most of this breed are pragmatists who demand to measure the effect of any change. So very often, implemented change is based upon a single idea or philosophy, considered in isolation.

There is nothing spectacular in this report; rather the contrary. There is a tedim about reviewing attitudes, without forming a fixed one yourself; in describing an experiment which had a result that was unexpected, but which should have been aimed for in the first place; and, in attempting to determine a precision of classification where, possibly, pre-

/cision is

cision is unwanted and potentially embarrassing.

There is little that is scholarly in describing action research, particularly in the area of administration of correspondence education which inspires very little enthusiasm except from those who are devoted to it. All such administrators I have met and heard are so devoted. This report is directed to that group. It is not my aim to convert any to the mode of external studies (or distance learning, or off-campus studies, or whatever other term is used.) There are student-applicants aplenty. Only a small proportion of those shanghaied into its administration wish to leave it (which seems to be an irritant to those outsiders who fail to sense the rewards of mass production of learning situations). Its administration is fraught with hazards; its pace is hectic; and, forward-planning and (teaching, as well as organizational) quality-control ever demanding.

The "message", if there has to be one, is that it is possible to control the proportion of those who do not start after enrolment; it may be possible

/to reclaim

to reclaim those who fail an examination; and, the proportion of those who drop-out may be reduced, but there are no indications that the proportion is controllable.

Because of the multi-dimensional character of student attrition, it is inevitable that any studies of it must be highly descriptive. I have attempted to prevent this report from being purely narrative by presenting a wide variety of expressed opinions in the first chapter, and a brief consideration of correspondence study and attrition from it in the second. Naturally, in the manner of presentation of the opinions there has been cavilling to cover the lack of judicious consideration, and in "consideration" of the correspondence mode there has been bias of the fanatic; it is so easy to forget that the mode does not, and will not, appeal to or suit all potential students at all times for all subjects.

The third chapter, be warned, is a tiring series of suggested times to record enrolments, non-starters, drop-outs, failures and completers. It has no merit

/other than

other than to provide a working document for practitioners to thrash out a form of uniform code. It is pedestrian, certainly. I would argue that in a modest search of the literature on adult student attrition I have not encountered precision as to the method of head-counting on a time basis. Without this, I submit, there is confusion which could prevent comparability.

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters describe the PUP (Preliminary Unit Pack) experiment. This was an elementary attempt to reduce the non-starter rate. It did that, but so could many other devices. It also reduced the drop-out rate. I would dearly love to learn why it did. I am not taking any moral stance that attrition is evil. I do sincerely believe that the means of controling it should be in the arsenal of educational administrators, particularly those in the field of correspondence education, where its extent determines the financial profit or loss in the private sector, and the effectiveness (if low) and educational standards (if high) in the public education sector.

In the seventh chapter, an attempt is made to

/apply

apply the data collected from a small sample of two hundred and eighty-four enrollees to test potential predictors of drop-out. (Who hasn't yearned for a huge sample and a computer?) In general terms, this was unsuccessful. The eighth chapter attempts to explore efficacy of "cures".

Whilst the concluding chapter, like the Glossary, gives me the opportunity to impose my personality, it is the data and the comparative graphs which I enjoy the most, as being the only real "truth" to grasp hold of. But is there really any truth? I would vouch for all except the eighteenth and twentieth columns which were collected in good faith, but on the erroneous assumption that the absence of the proper record in the proper place established that there had been no enrolment change. I apologise for their inclusion.

Naturally, my outlook has been from the technical and further education (TAFE) field. I make no apology for this, as it is in this field, throughout the world, where the high volume enrolments occur, and where the impact of administration is greatest.

GLOSSARY

Attrition: The loss of students to an institution through non-starting (or no-showing), drop-out, compulsory or optional, or failure. The difference between the number of enrollees and those of them who complete their course of study within a reasonable time.

CALS: Computer Assisted Learning Service. A method used in correspondence education whereby students' assignments in the form of selection of multiple-choice questions, are optically scanned and graded by a computer which also generates individual letters of comment and guidance.

Cognition: The faculty of knowing, especially as distinguished from feeling and willing. The act of gaining knowledge or becoming acquainted with an object through personal experience. Knowledge that extends beyond mere awareness. (Good, 1959, p.107)

Completer: A student who satisfactorily completes /(or is

(or is exempted from completing) all the requirements of a course of study as determined at the time of his enrolment in that course.

Completion rate, adjusted: Students who complete their enrolled course of study expressed as a percentage of starters.

Completion rate, crude (or raw): Students who complete their enrolled course of study expressed as a percentage of enrollers.

Correspondence mode: The form of learning by correspondence study, with little or no face-to-face interaction between teacher and student.

Correspondence study: Formal study and instruction conducted by mail, using texts, course outlines, and other materials, with lesson reports, corrections and examinations. (Good, 1959, p.136)

Course, or course of study: A series of subjects chosen to provide a longitudinal programme of organized

/study to

study to prepare the student to an accepted and predetermined standard of knowledge or skill, usually associated with a form of certification by the institution offering the course, or by the professional or trade association at whose behest the institution conducts the course.

Course Leaflet: A single sheet briefly describing the course structure (subjects by stages) of one or more similar courses, appropriateness of the course/s, and particulars of the text books required for first-year subjects.

Distance education: Correspondence education in which the mail service is not the main vehicle of communication between the institution and its teachers and their students, but rather utilizes a shotgun approach by mail, radio, television, telephone and (audio and video) recordings collected from study-centres.

Drop-out: A student who discontinues or abandons his enrolled course of study for such a period that it

/is unlikely

is unlikely or even impossible for him to return to them. The term is sometimes loosely used to include non-starters and no-shows.

Education for an elite: The view, more compatible with an oligarchical form of government than a government of, by, and for the people, that a select few should receive an education for leadership suited to the natural distinctions among men. An education founded on the responsibility of those qualified to deal with problems of social policy while a different kind of education is provided for the masses. (Good, 1959, p.194)

Enrollee: An applicant for entrance into a specified course of study with an educational institution, the enrolment form of whom has been accepted by that institution which has entered his name on the roll for the specified course.

Face-to-face: Social interaction where interaction is direct. A term used to distinguish educational institutions which largely rely for the

/initiation

initiation of learning upon direct contact between teacher and student, from those institutions directing correspondence study.

Face-to-face mode: The form of teaching based upon a student seeing and hearing his teacher on a regular basis.

Failure: A student who has attempted a supervised test or examination and has failed that test requiring him to withdraw from his course of study, or requiring him to re-attempt a further examination which he declines to do. A student who fails a test and is required to re-enrol in his course of study before he may reattempt that test is considered to be a failure if he does not so re-enrol.

Fast-starters: Correspondence students who submit their first assignment promptly after receipt of learning material, and their second assignment shortly thereafter.

Fixed-pacing: A system of education whereby the /institution

institution determines the rate at which its students shall progress through a course of study, resulting in students who fall behind, whose studies are interrupted, or who fail a test or examination, being required to recommence from the beginning.

Free-pacing: An alternative term to self-pacing.

Grade Point: Numerical evaluation of scholastic achievement based upon a formula of equivalents that grants credit varying with the grade attained, as, for example, 6 points for A, 5 for B, etc., with zero or negative points for failure. (Good, 1959, p.251)

Grade Point Average (GPA): The average of the scored grade points for subjects attempted.

Institution: A blanket term to cover a university, college, school or company offering a formal course of study, rather than the commission or department controlling the described educational unit.

/Learning

Learning Material, Correspondence: All forms of self-instructional material issued by a correspondence institution to its enrollees, as distinct from other material which they may be required to independently obtain for themselves.

No-show: An enrollee who has not, within a reasonable time or at a specified time, formally presented himself to the face-to-face institution with which he enrolled.

Non-starter: An enrollee who has not, within a reasonable time, submitted any assignments to the correspondence-study institution with which he is enrolled.

Normals: Enrollees who were sent a Course Leaflet and Enrolment Form, and were enrolled after submitting an adequately completed Form with documentary evidence of entry requirements where required.

Open system of education: One whereby there are no (or very few) denials to course-entry or exclusion

/from courses

from courses or educational institutions, based on a belief that every person is entitled to attempt and test his abilities by himself.

Preliminary Lesson Unit: A unit of learning material issued prior to enrolment, containing an overview of the correspondence institution and its methods and a sample of the usual lesson material of that institution, providing assignment questions not only on that sample but also upon the institution's procedures.

Preliminary Unit Pack (or PUP): A pre-packaged envelope containing a Preliminary Lesson Unit, Course Details (usually of a number of related courses) with synopses and booklists of first-year subjects, and an Enrolment Form.

Proprietary education: The private sector in education where there is no taxpayer-supported funding.

PUP: Abbreviation of Preliminary Unit Pack.

PUPs: Enrollees who were sent a Preliminary Unit /Pack,

Pack, and were enrolled after submitting answers to assignment questions set in the Preliminary Lesson Unit with an adequately completed Enrolment Form and with documentary evidence of entry requirements where required.

Repeaters: Students who fail a subject or subjects, or whose studies are deferred or interrupted to such an extent that they do not attempt a subject final examination, and, accordingly, in a fixed-pace education system must recommence at the start.

Residential session: A planned learning-experience based upon interaction between students themselves and between students and mentors arising from continuing close physical proximity apart from distractions. Some educationists believe that such sessions are an essential part of total learning by correspondence, and as such should be a compulsory course requirement.

Self-contained learning material: Correspondence material to assist a student to learn and prepare /him for

him for assessment in a subject, where that material does not refer the student to any text book which he is required to acquire.

Self-pacing or self-paced learning: A method of formal eduuation where the student is allowed freedom to determine the pace or rate at which he will work. The institution's expectations, in the way of assignments or projects, are clearly and precisely notified to students who, ideally, can attempt supervised examinations when they consider they are ready to sit for them.

Shotgun submission: Within the framework of a self-pacing system of correspondence study, the submission by students of assignments at such a pace as to indicate that they are little concerned with comments and corrections. Whilst generally insulting to teachers, such an attitude, if linked with creditable grades, could lead to spectacular success.

Stop-outs: Those high-school graduates with the pre-requisite grades to enable them to take advantage of /"free"

"free" higher education, but who nevertheless elect to immediately enter the work-force, and remain there.

Student: An enrollee who has attended classes or submitted assignments, or a recent enrollee who has not but who cannot yet be considered a non-starter or a no-show.

Subject: A field of organized study which is assessed by an institution as a discrete unit standing alone, except that other subjects may be prerequisites to it, and it, in turn, may be a prerequisite of a later subject. A number, or series, of subjects together make up a course of study.

Synopsis: A list of the contents of each lesson unit of a subject together with the supervised-test points.

Theory of elite: In social and political philosophy, the view that some kind of oligarchy should prevail or that a group made up of a few should hold the ultimate power of determination over the will of the many. (Good, 1959, p.198)

/Turnaround

Turnaround: The period elapsing between the time of mailing by an external student of his completed assignment and the time of its return to him, duly corrected and graded.

Withdrawer: An enrollee who formally cancels his enrolment in a course of study.

Chapter 1: ATTRITION IN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Rightly or wrongly, industrialized countries are rapidly converting their school education systems to open systems where every person is given a chance, and another chance, and yet another, and so on. Pupils must drop-out to leave. There has been a trend for fewer and fewer pupils to drop-out of high school. In open systems, this leads to an increasing proportion dropping-out at post-secondary levels. In such a situation, given an "adequate supply" of graduates it could be considered that it would be more economical if a proportion of the drop-outs had been stop-outs. It would follow that more stress should be given to entry-counselling and greater student self-selection of courses with adequacy of data for that selection.

"Everybody knows" about drop-outs. Literature and the popular press are full of opinion. Armchair speculation ranges from viewing them as beach-bums loving life on hand-outs to seeing them as those whose spirits have been cruelly broken by "the system". It

/is worth

is worth airing the more seriously-derived views to see whether, and to what extent, they reflect reality, in the hope that if attrition is an "ill" the way will be pointed to its cure.

What Problem?

In writing of the Open University, Freeman (1975, p.31) said,

> To see all these people (applicants) as potential graduates is to fail to appreciate their various needs. Some want a disciplined course of study which they missed in their youth. Others want to express or test themselves; some want to be more involved in our society; and many simply do not know what they want.

Perhaps I could add yet another category, those who know precisely what they want - to be recognized by their employers and friends as a registered part-time student, and nothing more. To consider these categories as exhaustive can be hazardous.

A respectable body of educationists and administrators do not view attrition as a problem, but consider

/it to be

it to be part of the natural order of education, outside their control, and part of the desired selection process.

Brawer (1971, p.18) comments, "college is seen as a 'good' and, accordingly, any individual who fails to accept his opportunity to complete college is considered to be misguided or somehow inadequate."

Whether you choose the Freeman or Brawer (society criticism) reasoning, there can hardly be a denial that attrition causes hardship, and, if it can be avoided, it should be.

Natural Selection

I believe that a degree of rationing of some educational resources is justifiable and, in some cases, essential. Such an attitude does not depend upon the theory of elite which I reject. In any event, where rationing does exist or there is a system of education for an elite, a form of argument can be advanced that educational attrition is merely part of the natural order of selection of the fittest.

/Certainly

Certainly some non-starters, drop-outs, and failures could be considered intellectual or emotional cripples by the fittest. Every term used to cover various forms of attrition suggests this. Attrition, as "the loss through the wearing-away from friction", suggests that it is the weakest part that is lost. Many view educational attrition in this simplistic way. Even brief reflection leads to the realisation that, with physical attrition, it is only that part that is subject to the friction that wears-away. Brawer (1971, p.10) found that there was no significant difference between the scores of adult persisters and drop-outs as measured by the A-F Inventory, a technique designed to measure ego strength. There are a number of studies (which will be referred to later) indicating that part-timers who undergo life-change pressures withdraw, and that the persisters are those who are not so stressed.

Students Drop-Out, Scholars Stay!

Burton, in 1943 (p.236), commented that many of the students "in Evening and Technical Schools ... are studying for grimly utilitarian reasons rather than from any love of learning." Perhaps those education-

/ists who

ists who consider attrition part of the natural order believe that drop-outs are those who do not have sufficient love of learning and, to carry the attempted justification to its conclusion, were not born with enough.

Personality testing to identify high drop-out risk students has not been successful, and there is no indication of improvement in its precision. Of course, teachers covert students who love to learn, but there are just not enough of them to keep the wheels of higher education turning. Studying for certification now appears to be a fact of life in most societies.

Nothing is Ever Wasted

Some adopt a physical conversion-of-matter stance and view a course of study as a continuum with accumulating proportionate benefits accruing to the learner almost day by day. In this light a drop-out does not lose but rather withdraws with what he has got; in other words, the optimist's half-full rather than half-empty. This attitude is naturally linked to

/the selection

the selection view of attrition; those who voluntarily drop-out would never get to the finish-post in any circumstances.

Generally, those who hold these philosophies speak from their experience with full-time students in a time of educational rationing. Perhaps with such a population in that situation, the extent, if any, to which they are wrong is so slight as to be of insignificant effect or importance. Profiles of part-time students and their attrition pattern are so different from those of the full-timers that they must warrant separate investigation. Whilst the profiles of the external part-timers are little different from those of the total part-time student population, their attrition pattern is found to be very different where it is possible to make comparisons. It could well be that the further the departure from the relatively homogenous group of full-timers, the greater the complexity to an extent where what may have held for the original group is now swamped in complexity.

Coombs and Hallak (1972, pp.94-5), whilst conceding

/that many

that many drop-outs "carry away something useful", believed that the "great majority ... must unfortunately be classified as investments of dubious value". They further point out, most effectively, that the objective of institutions is to produce "finishers" rather than drop-outs. If colleges and universities have a function to cull the unworthy from the finishers, that function is a subsidiary one.

The Celibate Hermit

In commenting upon the high attrition rates of Massey University, Bewley (1970, pp.16-17) rationalized that the extra-mural student's preoccupations in a job and home perpetually make prior demands. A number of western educationists appear to consider that students have made unwise choices in devoting time to job and home at the expense of study. Bewley argues for more stringent admission requirements to reduce these preoccupations, presumably by searching for celibate hermits as students.

Should there be a possibility of creating such a behavioural change, even if priorities made it

/desirable

desirable, success on a large scale would be impossible (before 2084, at any rate).

Breach of Contract

Another argument is that there is an unwritten teach-learn contract between institution (to teach at an acceptable level) and student (to learn to an approvable standard). A student who does not reach the required standard, by premature withdrawal or by failure, has breached his contract and deserves no sympathy; he should consider himself lucky he is not sued for breach of contract.

This argument could be successfully advanced by an institution which has made the fullest disclosure of the standard of learning demanded, could guarantee that its teaching (in the widest sense) will meet a standard required for each and every student, and has established and administered entry tests to determine that enrollees have the minimum intellectual and emotional requirements to achieve the demanded standard.

/Could any

Could any institution say that it has done this? Neither institution nor student is ever perfect. There is a similarity, here, to the driver-squabbles after a motor accident. There is almost inevitable contributory negligence. Casting blame does not cure.

Why Stay?

Brawer (1971, p.21) states the basis of the open system, "He (the student) is not a bit of stuff to be shaped but rather, a dynamic individual who is being influenced by the force field of education." She considers (p.20) that a society, which measures its worth by the finished products of certification, viewing students as input and output, is the cause of the "dropout problem". She gives one perception of attrition as,

> a nefarious gambit that is being foisted on the nation by an educational establishment and well-propagandized parents who now equate learning solely with the number of school years completed.

There is a ring of truth to what she says, but it is rather like the ring of the Liberty Bell, ideal-

/istic.

istic. Whether or not attrition is the product of an imperfect society, in that society attrition does cause anguish and loss of self-respect. The pain does not disappear just because there should be no pain.

Anderson (1972, p.130) comments that, "from the student's point of view failure is frequently a personal tragedy, destroying the hopes and achievements of previous years and causing great uncertainty about the future. The anti-intellectualism in Australian society may well be nurtured by the annual battalions of 'failures'."

Drop-Outs Later Drop-In

The continual widening of choice available in so many areas to persons in a highly industrialized society also applies to choice of educational institution. There are signs that enrollees are not only making active choices when they can, they are also sampling "brands".

"The attrition rate is perhaps not as high as some statistics indicate" was McDermott's (1975, p.55)

/conclusion

conclusion after his follow-up study of discontinuing students, over half of whom were found to have transferred to other institutions.

The extent of transferring or retreading varies greatly from one country to another. Where it exists, it can be sociologically beneficial, but it is expensive if it is unexpected to those institutions which have not taken it into account in their planning.

What Attrition?

Some may see the ideal society as one where only few fail and few drop-out; or should it be few drop-out because only few fail? This could be said of the British system.

There is a political factor in attrition. Drever (1967, p.46) commenting upon the proposals of the Robbins Committee said, "Whatever we do, it must never happen or appear to happen that the slick idler is given public money at the expense of the worthy and laborious plodder."

/This view

This view is expressed in a more emotive way by Hajnal (1972, p.98); "For a university it is a disgrace if more than a small proportion of its students leave without obtaining a degree." He goes on (p.223) to say,

> To some extent the low wastage-rate is a kind of optical illusion. The small number of students who fail to graduate is not really any indication that the system is enabling a high proportion to attain a worthwhile or useful achievement except in the sense that the mere status of being a graduate confers satisfaction or enhances employment opportunities.

Although it is difficult for economists and accountants to measure the effectiveness of educational institutions, if Cross' (1973, p.417) statement, "We are no longer content to equate hours in the classroom or years on the campus with educational competency." is accepted, the output of students from traditional courses is not an effective single measure. Temporarily curing attrition by promising certification to all who submit assignments and sit

/for

for examinations, regardless of extent of learning or standard achieved, creates a problem greater than excessive attrition. Excessive attrition and absence of educational standards are extremes that cannot be afforded. Raising standards will increase failures, but need not necessarily increase the overall attrition rate. Reduction of attrition could be considered to be an essential prerequisite to the raising of standards by an institution.

Accountability

Accountability is based upon measurement. So much in education is immeasurable. Attrition is measurable. Regardless of whether attrition is an accountability-factor it will be taken as such by any management auditor. With the auditor's preoccupation for calculation, proportions could be applied to withdrawers, to arrive at "Equivalent Students Passing" on a similar basis as Equivalent Full-Time Students. It is not impossible to imagine that whoever could say that two half-time part-timers equal one full-timer (rather than their space occupancy and resource-time consumption are equal), could just as easily convert two

/half-way

half-way withdrawers to one completing. To imagine that even the friendliest auditor could take such an approach to non-starters and failures is absurd.

Where there is excessive demand upon the educational resources (or, perhaps, the certification-ability) of an institution resulting in enrolment quotas, usually there is little concern for the non-starter, other than annoyance because of the waste of administrative capacity. This attitude may be justifiable, but it often leads to lack of concern about withdrawers who have consumed not only administrative, but educational resources, the lack of which led to the quotas in the first instance.

McIntosh (1975, p.45), in referring to Open University attrition, points out that not only is it costly in terms of money and morale to drop-outs, "it is a waste of a place, a matter of educational responsibility and, on top of that, potentially damaging to the reputation and survival of the university." She also notes that word-of-mouth publicity can be negative as well as profitable.

/Drop-Outs

Drop-Outs Cost Too Much

Alfred (1973, p.11) believed that, "In terms of the premium placed by educational administrators on efficiency and accountability, the extent of student attrition constitutes one measure of the efficiency of an educational institution."

Coombs and Hallak (1972, p.94) specifically link the rising costs and declining effectiveness of education with "the sharp rise in 'dropouts' and 'repeaters'". Whether drop-outs should be linked with repeaters is dubious unless both are due to lowering of entrance standards. That increase in attrition causes increased costs appears to be indisputable.

Levin (1972) included an estimated cost of three billion dollars per year in welfare payments alone in his findings on the national cost of inadequate education in America.

Coombs and Hallak (1972, p.22) in describing a costing exercise in Thailand point to the effects of drop-outs in educational planning,

/In the

In the extreme case of vocational and technical education, the projected resource allocation for recurrent costs was apparently 88 per cent higher than necessary to meet the enrolment targets of the Plan, but some 14 per cent too little to meet the target number of graduates.

The Murray Report (Report of the Committee on Australian Universities, 1957) commented, "Such a high failure rate is a national extravagance which can ill be afforded."

Conclusion

Venn (1972, p.103) refers to the human being as the greatest resource any nation can possess, and, "each time this resource is wasted, to whatever degree, it represents a tragic loss to the nation and the world".

It can hardly be denied that there are a multitude of reasons that could be the cause of an individual non-starter or drop-out. Some could be acute whilst others could be chronic. Unless an institution is

/certain

certain that attrition is not due to acute or temporary reasons which it could cure economically; is not due to circumstances it unintentionally created or fostered; and, is not due to injustice, incompetence or unjustifiable inadequacy on its part; that institution cannot afford to ignore the attrition problem.

Merely because research indicates that drop-out is largely related to factors other than what educational institutions do to a student is no justification for those institutions being disinterested in the problem which vitally affects their administration, and, sometimes, their survival. Houle (1973, p.63) quotes Ashby's American universities' attrition rate of forty-seven per cent (47%), and comments of the result,

> Chronic budgetary crises caused such real hardships as the abandonment of projected plans for programs and institutions, the contraction or closing of colleges, and the unemployment of faculty members.

He has painted a horrifying picture which would

/hardly

hardly be acknowledged by many administrators in higher education. Nonetheless it might be worth having a quick check of the trend shown by those computer print-outs that seem to have been swept under the carpet, rather than finding their way into annual reports.

It is difficult to consider withrawals as being other than representative of loss of energy, time and resources. Does the selection process warrant this cost? Can the same result be achieved at less cost and with less social and emotional harm? Whilst the latter may be in the realm of the politicians and social workers, the aspect of cost is surely a matter for educational administrators, not as auditors of educationists but as collaborators with them.

In any case, early identification of the potential drop-out, if economical, would lead to more efficient resource-utilization and assist in determining clearly defined goals of the institution as well as of its applicants.

Chapter 2: CORRESPONDENCE STUDY ATTRITION

Correspondence Study: Is It Education?

In an era where quantity production by automatic means is seen to increase standards of living and to reduce physical effort and hardship, it is natural that some should consider education as a product to be achieved with minimum human effort and at the least financial cost. In such an environment, it is also to be expected that some yearn for a return to the monastic system of a community of scholars, insulated from the hurly-burly of commercialism. Perhaps an affluent society can afford such a group, but it never seems to want to; there seems to be a never-ending striving for even greater affluence with the knife forever poised to slash the non-productive cost.

Nature seems to rapidly rid itself of extremes. Societies of man can only cope with small groups of extremists although they can remain intact whilst majority opinion pendulates between the two. The most that can be said with any certainty, then, is

/that

that education lies somewhere between the extremes of commercial effectiveness and ivory-tower isolationism.

Because correspondence study can be viewed by the monastic scholastics as pandering to the commercials (after all isn't it sometimes sold rather than being rendered for a fee?) does it really belong in the camp of the other extremists? The answer to this question is not determined by the degree of current respectability. If there is anything suspect about correspondence study it is not the mode so much as the methods of selling it, or the false promises that are sometimes held out to beguile. The communities of scholars would have degenerated even further than they did if it had not been for the correspondence links between them, and the membership interchange resulting from that correspondence. It could even be said that all advanced education, other than the narrowest, up until the nineteenth century was effected by correspondence study.

To some, correspondence study seems to be

/almost

almost teacher-less. Except for the small bands of external students who consider assignments to be mere hurdles on the path to completion rather than open doors to guidance, and "teachers" who act as grading machines, few involved with external studies would agree. Although correspondence education is far from being teacher-dominated or -centred, it depends on teaching par excellence; the presentation needs to be better, encouragement effort must be greater, and teaching relationships must be closer and more individualized. Without these there can be no success, and there is success aplenty!

Nor is the concept of separation of tuition from assessment new or shameworthy:

> Every university institution established in England and Wales between 1836 and 1949 went through an apprenticeship during which its students were prepared for London external degrees. (Houle, 1973, p.22)

Perhaps the debate will continue forever; does

/it really

it really matter? There can hardly be any denial that learning does take place.

Can Correspondence Study Be Successful?

In India, as Singh (1972, p.78) reports, the performance of correspondence students (at university examinations) is far better than that of the others. He suggests that this could be due to classroom spoon-feeding curbing the intelligent student's "independent thinking and initiative in reading and grasping things on his own".

Certainly, the group of students who are "hooked-on" correspondence study and continue to complete course after course is a small one, but possibly larger than the professional full-time student body, on a proportional basis. Not all successful face-to-face students who transfer to a corespondence institution are successful, but those who are, in my experience, are converts for life.

Essex and Anderson (1972, p.20) suggest that one of the attractive features of correspondence study is

/the "opportunity

the "opportunity to gain and regain confidence in academic abilities without pressures of classroom competition."

The confidence gained by the converts to the mode could increase the external studies' attrition rates, by their preaching that the process was easy. Let it be hoped that the learning process was painless, but it is seldom easy except for some who compare it with the regimen of attending classes.

Whether it is suitable for many, or not, many think it will be. Potential students are becoming more and more reluctant to surrender their earning power as demanded by full-time studies. Coakwell (1974) in his attempts to forecast student enrolment by the Delphi technique found that his colleagues overestimated full-time enrolments by twenty-five per cent (25%) and underestimated part-time enrolments by forty-two per cent (42%). This could be an indicator that educationists have not detected the trend in demand away from full-time to part-time studies.

/Scholarships

Scholarships alone are not the enducement they once were. Maybe gainful (in satisfaction as well as salary) employment is close to being considered a privilege, and, in the not too distant future, the value of scholarships will have to be higher than alternative salaries. Qualifications alone are no longer a guarantee of employment.

Technical Education by Correspondence

Institutional correspondence study began in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It arose, almost simultaneously in many parts of the world; a world beginning to believe that mass education of choice could and should be a reality. It is therefore difficult to decide which, among the claimants, was first. In any event, vocational training rivals religious instruction for first place in those early years. Although the latter has withered in most countries, technical correspondence has expanded without a falter. Even after a century of success, some critics insist that it is not possible to acquire practical skills by the correspondence method.

/Hartridge

Hartridge (1976, p.4) makes the point that practical experience is needed whatever the mode of teaching and that it does not become more urgent where the distance mode is used. In some cases kits are supplied by the institution, in others, intensive practical sessions are compulsory. These may not be the best approachs.

Because of the individualized character of the correspondence method, it could be possible to modularize lesson units to enable students to choose their own sequence to match their current work experiences, rather than the usual system of having numbered sequential units which must be attempted in strict number-order.

In a society with a clear hierarchy of educational status, technical education is rarely the product of initial choice. Correspondence study is rarely the brand of first choice, of the young, at any rate. Often, then, young enrollees are to a certain extent disillusioned with formal education and its requirements and doubt its rewards.

/Is Technical

Is Technical Correspondence Study Successful?

In the field of technical education by correspondence the performance of external students at state-wide exams is of such little worry that the very large worry of drop-out is disguised by it. Even though about one-third of oral students fail state-wide final examinations, at the College of External Studies, when a student fails one of those exams it is a rare event justifying detailed examination of his file and study-records.

Back in 1933, Gundry (p.13) wrote, "The high standard of proficiency reached by the earlier Correspondence students has been well maintained, the results averaging from 90 to 96 per cent of passes at the Final Examinations." The College has a proud record of passes by students who have adapted to the correspondence mode by progressing through their studies at the expected pace and attempted final exams. The drop-out rate is comparable to oral colleges - very high, but, whereas the oral student drops-out, the correspondence student tends to dribble-out or waste-away slowly.

/Attrition

Attrition from Correspondence Education

When a generation, reared on disposability of products in a long period of over-employment, is faced with maturing in an era of unemployment, it is natural that they will feel under pressure and that, perhaps, the worker is disposable also. It is so easy to dispose of a correspondence course; no questions like, "Why didn't you go to classes last week?" to answer to family, friends and employer.

With the phenomenal rate of expansion of knowledge, coupled with the obsolescence and destruction of buildings and plant built to last "almost forever", is it any wonder that buyers do not view education as a capital investment? If one brand of learning does not help them now, right now, this instant, it cannot be any good, so on to sample another brand with increasing disillusionment and resentment.

Generally, drop-out rates are rarely publicised and, when they are, details are seldom given of compilation methodology vital for comparability study. Understatement of the true dimensions of the attrition

/problem

problem has, perhaps, led to over-simplistic treatment.

Attrition in correspondence education can be divided into three enrollee categories; the non-starter, the drop-out prior to examination, and the drop-out after failure in an examination. Those who fall within the latter category represent only a small proportion. (There are an even smaller number who pass but do not continue. Although these represent the greatest loss per head to the institution, generally their number is insignificant.)

Attrition from an Open Self-Pacing System?

In an open entry and re-entry correspondence institution without any time limit on completing, and without any exclusion for unsatisfactory progress, it could be argued that there cannot be any attrition. Even if enrollees purposefully notify their withdrawal, if there is no barrier to their re-entry, who can say they have irrevocably withdrawn? If there is no time limit upon completion of a course by a student, until he dies how can he

/be considered

be considered as not being a potential completer?

Although these arguments are seductive, without a new vocabulary to describe pseudo-attrition, the statistical reported results would be absurd. A realistic approach must be taken. If it appears that a student in such a system will never start, he should be treated as a non-starter. If he does commence it is not shameful to treat him as a re-entry. If a starter discontinues submitting any assignments for an inordinate period, he can be treated as a drop-out. Similarly if he fails an examination and does not recommence submitting assignments within a reasonable time, he should be classified as a failure.

In a self-pacing system, categorization must hinge on this concept of a "reasonable time".

Reasonable Time

To accept as reasonable what is average time taken by students is attractive. Reflection will reveal the consequences, however. Those who have

/taken

taken longer than average time, include those who have actually achieved. To accept as reasonable the longest time taken by an achiever is to include too high a proportion of those who never achieve. Also, it is doubtful whether an institution's expectations are any more reasonable than what is considered reasonable by the slowest achiever. If the systems of each institution were taken into consideration in determining what would be a reasonable time for it, comparability would be dubious.

It would appear that it is necessary to select an arbitrary time as reasonable, determining that time on the assumption that an institution's systems are reasonable and enable an enrollee or student to perform in that time. In selecting an arbitrary time, there should be a leaning towards leniency otherwise statistics will be plagued by re-entries.

It is suggested that three months after enrolment is a reasonable time to allow a student to

/submit

submit his first assignment. If he does not, he could be considered (quite reasonably) to be a non-starter.

The Non-Starter

The non-starter, an enrollee who does not submit an assignment, is a breed peculiar to external studies. He is only roughly equivalent to the no-show, the oral, or on-campus, mode enrollee who does not attend a class. Invariably, with the latter, some form of personal appearance (if not, interview) is required before he became an enrollee; such an appearance represents a degree of commitment which is absent with a correspondence student whose enrolment is handled by mail.

The non-starter rates are greater than that of the no-shows. It is possible that the drop-out and failure from the off-campus mode are less than from on-campus; and, probably, reasons or causes of part-timers drop-out are the same regardless of the mode. Concentration on the non-starter is justifiable.

Chapter 3: ATTRITION CATEGORIES

Introduction

A major criticism which can be levelled at many attrition studies is that freely-used terms are not defined. Without such definition it is not possible to safely compare results from different institutions. For example, "drop-out" may be taken as those who enrol but do not satisfactorily complete their enrolled courses of study. It may be considered that there cannot be a drop-out until he has been a drop-in, and that enrolment is a formality that does not display commitment. Drop-outs, then, would only be drawn from the smaller population of those who actually attend classes or submit their first correspondence assignment.

Even where there is consensus between two institutions as to the basic definition, difficulty can arise through different administrative systems or attitudes to enrolment. Accountants will tend to exclude enrollees from whom fees are due, but collection is not possible. Statisticians may

/include

include all who submit a completed enrolment form. Registrars could include those whose enrolment forms have been accepted; others may require personal attendance to sign a matriculation register as well. Academics invariably only count those who attend their first lecture, answer to their names, and have those names recorded in the class roll.

From Enquiry to Completion

Detailing and examining the relevant actions from start to finish is merited in an effort to recognise those statistically relevant and to attach labels to them. Whilst the majority are common to face-to-face and correspondence education, only those which apply to the latter will be considered:

Career Counselling

Enquiry for Course Enrolment Details

Course-Requirement Counselling

Application for Enrolment

Acceptance of Application

Offer to Enrol

Acceptance of Offer to Enrol

Formal Enrolment by Institution

/Submission

Submission of First Assignment

Entry in Subject "Roll"

Requirement to Re-Submit First Assignment

Attendance at Compulsory Face-to-Face Session

Regular Submission of Assignments

Invitation to Sit for Test/Examination

Sitting for Test/Examination

Sitting for Special Test/Examination

Re-Enrolling

Satisfying All Course Requirements

Issuance of Certification

The importance, or even relevance, of each of these steps will be considered, but will depend upon the peculiar requirements of each individual institution to a very large extent.

Course Counselling

Whether the institution itself or some outside agency, which refers those counselled to the institution, carries out this initial counselling, details of those counselled would not be relevant to the attrition figures themselves. They could be a

/management

management tool in controlling enrolments, and the extent of counselling could have a considerable effect upon the extent of attrition, it could be imagined. Data and follow-through would be vital for any attrition-causal study.

Enquiry for Course Enrolment Details

Even in an open system, an enquiry cannot be counted as an enrolment. Nevertheless, in such a system, enquirers can often only obtain course detail by completing an enrolment form and actually enrolling, where the institution has not taken this aspect seriously in its planning. Such institutions are often pre-occupied in processing enrolments and servicing enrolled students. The responsibility to describe the mode, its demands and benefits, together with particular requirements of individual courses must lie with the educational administrator.

Course-Requirement Counselling

Often, it is not until an enrolment application has been lodged that it becomes obvious that the applicant had not informed himself of the educational

/or

or occupational prerequisites or requirements. Sometimes, due to error, this realization occurs after formal enrolment. The resulting enrolment cancellation should reduce the enrolment tally, rather than be counted as a non-starter.

Application for Enrolment

The extent to which an enrolment application should be taken seriously is often unknown and should remain unknown. The "education-shoppers" invariably submit applications to a number of institutions with the intention of deferring their final decisions until there is clarification of what is really, in fact, available to them. Perhaps, with some, there is never the intention to make such a decision; the mere acceptance or rejection serves their purpose. Some institutions have no prerequisites for some courses. In these cases, recording receipt of an application can be taken as the enrolment record. If fees are charged, the receipt of fees would be the operative time. Otherwise, receipt of application for enrolment is not relevant statistically.

/Acceptance

Acceptance of Enrolment

After all checks as to eligibility, fee-payment, and subject-programme have been completed, the application should be treated as an enrolment, even though formal notification has not yet been given, or learning material despatched, to the enrollee. Only if, prior to that notification and despatch, the applicant notifies his withdrawal, should the enrolment figure be adjusted.

Offer to Enrol

Because of the proportion of insincere applications, institutions which impose enrolment quotas often cull enrolment applications into two groups, those they will offer a place, and those who will be offered if a smaller-than-expected proportion of the first group do not accept the institution's offers. Although an offer imposes an obligation on the institution, the number of them does not hold any place in enrolment statistics for attrition purposes.

/Acceptance

Acceptance of Offer to Enrol

Provided the acceptance is complete (e.g., accompanied by any fees required), receipt of the acceptance should be the time for recording enrolment. Only if there has been a patent error, or fees later refunded, should the enrolment figure be reduced to adjust. Even then, it is necessary to impose a time limit within which adjustments can be made.

Formal Enrolment by Institution

Rarely do correspondence institutions require an applicant to personally attend to sign a matriculation register or some other formal roll. In a complex enrolment system there is often a final check that all requirements have been met. Provided that the process is not protracted, it is at this point that the enrolment should be counted.

Submission of First Assignment

It is a rather common practice to refrain from recording an enrolment until the enrollee has submitted his first assignment. Although there are logical

/arguments

arguments to support this practice, too often there has been inadequate recording at the true enrolment stage with consequent "loss" of non-starter statistics and understatement of attrition.

If the first assignment is not submitted within a reasonable time after enrolment, or within such a time after the required submission date, the enrollee should be recorded as a non-starter and his enrolment cancelled. If he enrols again he should represent a new enrollee statistic. If a very late submission of a first assignment is accepted, the same procedure of re-count should be adopted. Naturally, where the institution has adopted a self-pacing practice, an enrollee should not be considered as a non-starter until three months after learning material has been sent to him.

It is suggested that data be collected of those enrollees who do not submit their first assignment one day before the due date or within one month after enrolment if there is no due date. There is evidence to indicate that such data could be the most

/effective

effective predictor of drop-out or failure.

Entry in Subject "Roll"

Departments are concerned with enrolments in subjects for which they are responsible. Regardless of the criteria they may use for recording individual subject enrolment, this data should be ignored in favour of centralized enrolment recording. In the study of attrition, it is the head-count rather than subject-enrolment detail which is important. Following from this, failure to start a subject or withdrawal from a subject should be ignored unless all subjects are involved.

Requirement to Re-Submit First Assignment

Whilst this requirement may cast doubt on the wisdom of enrolling the student, the student should not be classified as a non-starter. On the same basis, the award of a failing grade for the first assignment should have no statistical effect on attrition data. To do otherwise would indicate excessive reverence for segmental assessment.

/Attendance

Attendance at Compulsory Face-to-Face Session

Where attendance is made a compulsory course requirement (as distinct from a subject requirement), two weeks after failure to attend, the enrollee should be treated as a non-starter or drop-out, depending upon whether or not he had submitted his first assignment. Where attendance is not course-compulsory, the enrollee should be kept on strength.

Regular Submission of Assignments

When a student notifies his withdrawal from a course, he can be immediately treated as a non-starter or drop-out. Where he merely refrains from submitting assignments, without any explanation, some decisive action should be taken by the institution. It is suggested that two weeks after failure to submit (due date), or four weeks after last submission in a self-pacing system, a letter requesting explanation or statement of intention should be sent to the student. As well as being administratively sound practice, there is likely to be a reduction in drop-out if the institution shows it cares and if the student must decide.

/Invitation

Invitation to Sit for Test/Examination

When attempting a supervised test or examination is a compulsory course-requirement, two weeks after the closing date for applications to sit, the student who does not respond should be considered to be a drop-out. Where there is no such requirement, no statistical recording is warranted.

Sitting for Test/Examination

If attempting a supervised test or examination is a compulsory course-requirement, two weeks after the date of that test a student who did not sit or provide an explanation should be treated as a drop-out. Rarely does a failure at such an examination result in a compulsory withdrawal. Where it does, the student should be classed as a failure rather than a drop-out.

Sitting for a Special Test/Examination

The comments given in the previous paragraph apply. Until the student fails to sit, or the results of the examination are determined, he retains his status.

/Re-Enrolling

Re-Enrolling

Where an institution requires a student to confirm his intention to continue his course by a re-enrolment procedure, a student who does not re-enrol within one month after the required date should be considered a drop-out. Where it is usual for students to discontinue studies over a lengthy period, such as the Christmas school-vacation, it is advisable to require a written re-commitment.

Satisfying All Course Requirements

If an institution can identify those students who have completed all requirements of a course of study, the time of identification is the time for treating the student as a completer. A large institution or department comprising several institutions invariably finds it impossible to so identify students, even with computer-assistance. Perhaps this is because academics apparently delight in changing the requirements, resulting in groups of students working under different sets of rules; the classification of each group being determined

/by the year

by the year of their entry to the course.

Issuance of Certification

Where an application for certification is the vehicle for identification of those who have satisfied course-requirements, immediately that application is finally approved appears to be the time the stude changes his status to that of a completer. There appears to be no justification for waiting until a degree or diploma is awarded, or a certificate is issued.

Completion

An enrollee progresses to become a completer by satisfying the requirements of his enrolled course of study. To satisfy those requirements there are, invariably, a series of subject requirements to be met. During this transition period he may be exempted from some of these requirements, but such exemption is equivalent to his having completed them.

Failure to meet any one of the requirements

/may result

may result in his compulsory withdrawal from the course. If this occurs prior to his submission of an assignment he will be termed a non-starter, or referred to colloquially as one who "hasn't struck a blow". If his withdrawal occurs prior to his failure at a supervised test or examination, he is considered to be a drop-out. If he submits assignments after such a failure he will also be treated as a drop-out. If he does not submit any assignments after such a failure he will be classed as a failure. The three terms to describe attrition, "non-starter, drop-out, and failure", all have unfortunate emotive or psychological connotations. Their use is justified only on the grounds of expediency; no other terms have been applied and accepted. Even if other terms were used, without a change in societal attitudes, they too would attract the same undesirable connotations.

Chapter 4: BIRTH OF A "PUP"

Before Preliminary Unit Packs

Enquirers for details about courses offered by the College were sent a circular letter, enrolment forms and one or more one-page leaflets describing the course or courses. Upon return of the completed enrolment form (with any required evidence of admission prerequisites) and enrolment, enrollees were sent a booklet, "Learning by Correspondence", various leaflets and forms, together with the first batch of learning material (usually five lesson units) in every subject for which they were enrolled. The average subject enrolment of students enrolled in Business and Administrative Studies courses was three. The first despatch, therefore, was a hefty stack of reading material.

It was considered that the (approximately) three hundred pages in this stack was too much for them to cope with, particularly as most were faced with the problem of obtaining two or three text books at the same time.

/As each

As each first batch was individually packed, and there were only two storemen who knew their way around the lesson store containing over twelve thousand different lesson units, there were considerable delays in despatch. These delays created enquiries from applicants involving the valuable time of staff who could otherwise have been processing enrolments.

The Initiating Problem

The abolition of payment of fees on enrolling in vocational courses conducted by the New South Wales (then) Department of Technical Education from the start of 1974 resulted in a large increase in enrolments. The increase in enrolments of the College of External Studies was even greater; 1974 enrolments were twenty-nine per cent (29%) greater than those of 1973 even with extended delays in enrolment.

It was not possible to forecast the extent of the increase. There were no parallel experiences to draw upon. It was not known the extent to which the

/other

other sixty (local) colleges of the Department would be able to absorb an increase and, therefore, the extent of the (accomodation) overflow they would refer to the College.

Although the College traditionally accepts enrolments throughout the year and does not impose quotas, the overflow-effect resulted in a concentration of enquiries and applications in February and March 1974. The concentration was, possibly, also due to applicants assuming that there were, or would be quotas. Without additional staff, existing procedures collapsed. When the delay in enrolment reached eight weeks, new enquirers were sent a letter of apology and deferred for two months to enable the enrolment backlog to be cleared. Naturally this action was not applauded at any level.

Solving the Problem

Planning for 1975 took two forms. The first was a systems approach. The previous enrolment and re-enrolment single procedure with seventeen stops was replaced with eight separate procedures, none

/of which

of which, after an initial simple sorting, involved more than six stops. Staff were retrained for these new procedures but little explanation of reasons was given. It is believed that this latter feature was a prime reason for the later success achieved. (When staff understood what it was all about, they introduced personal variations of "improvement".)

The second approach was a blatant attempt, at least in the earliest planning stage, to restrict enrolments by early identification of non-starters. This was to be achieved by requiring applicants to complete assignment questions to a lesson unit prior to enrolment. It was not intended that these assignments would be corrected or commented upon as this would delay the enrolment process. The objective was to "get rid of" those who were not prepared to work, before they consumed administrative resources which could then be concentrated upon the "genuine" student.

Conception of the PUP

Because of its experimental nature the Prelimi-

/nary Lesson

nary Lesson Unit plan was applied to nine only of the one hundred and two courses offered, but those nine courses accounted for thirty-five per cent (35%) of the total first enrolments and included the two courses with the highest non-starter rates. One Unit was designed for the Diploma Entrance course (university matriculation entrance level) and another for seven Certificate Courses and one Special Course offered by the College on behalf of the School of Business and Administrative Studies. It is the latter Preliminary Lesson Unit which is the subject of this study. (A reduced facsimile is included in the Appendix.)

When planning was completed, it was intended that the system would serve the following purposes:

(a) Cull-out the non-starters;

(b) Enable applicants to self-select a course;

(c) Provide them with the opportunity to sample part of the mode and to learn something of the College's methods; and

(d) Provide a basis for counselling.

/After

After Birth

Despite early misgivings, there was unanimous acceptance and approval once the system was implemented. It appeared as if the original objectives, and more, had been achieved. The procedure was enlarged to cater for eighty per cent (80%) of new enrollees in 1976. In fact, it only covered sixty-nine per cent (69%). The reason is part of the PUP story. Student activity from PUPs has increased slightly, but their enrolments have dropped considerably.

Achievement is a powerful stimulus. Cunningham wrote in 1931 (p.69) in relation to correspondence teaching that, "Care should be taken that each pupil achieves some success in each assignment." The PUP system was designed so that every applicant could derive a feeling of achievement and was not discouraged by criticism or correction.

Preliminary Unit Pack Contents

Preliminary Unit Packs were preassembled and enveloped. Originally, they contained Synopses and Booklists of Stage I (first part-time year) subjects /of the

of the course that enquirer had expressed interest in, together with brief details of that course and closely related courses. After the first year's trial, one booklet, "Course Details", was prepared. This booklet contained details of seven courses and the subjects of their first stages.

As well as enrolment forms and the sheets described, each pack included a Preliminary Lesson Unit (facsimile in Appendix). The first section of the Unit was a reproduction of "Learning by Correspondence", an introduction to the College and procedures. The second section was a retired (and replaced) lesson unit, entitled "Background to Australian Law", an overview topic. To avoid later confusion, it had been decided to avoid any lesson unit applicants would encounter later in their studies. It was considered that it would be unfair to give them any good or bad quality learning material. A deliberate attempt was made to edit "Background to Australian Law" so that it would represent fair-average-quality of the College's printed material with, if anything, a flavour of dryness.

/Each

Each section of the Preliminary Lesson Unit contained questions, the answers to which were to be returned by the applicant with his enrolment form.

Purpose of the PUP

Although the original intention of the PUP was to cut the non-starter rate by insincere enquirers culling themselves out before becoming applicants for enrolment, by the time the PUP was initially issued (15 December, 1974) the original intention had been modified to include the following objectives:

(a) Reduction of the number of enrolment applications to be processed;

(b) Reduction of the number of post-enrolment administrative queries to be dealt with;

(c) Reduction of the non-starter rate;

(d) Retention of enquirers' enthusiasm to enrol; and

(e) Reduction of clerical error-rate by simplifying processes.

Theory Base

Paralleling the pragmatic approach to culling-out non-starters by requiring applicants to display

/evidence

evidence of their sincerity, was the hope that the "initiation" of preparing and submitting a correspondence assignment would, by Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, make them more appreciative of "membership" as enrollees, and less likely to drop-out. There had been a number of studies that had clearly shown that the highest wastage occurs right at the start, and this had been the College's experience. If this non-starter wastage was due to failure to overcome initial inertia, this would have been due to the initial effort required being too demanding for the individual. This could mean that either the individual was not able or that the first demand was too heavy. The demand was lightened by careful modulation of the difficulty and extent of the Preliminary Lesson Unit assignments. Inevitably the motivation must have altered from the desire to actually commence the course of study to that of proving ability for entry without need for any bridging course.

The PUP was introduced largely out of institutional frustration. Although there were many

/reasons

reasons why it might work, planning pressure prevented any research structuring which would have enabled each of these theories to be tested independently of one another.

Chapter 5: THE SAMPLED GROUP

PUP Courses

The College offered over one hundred (100) courses, most of them multi-subject. Only nine courses were chosen for the 1975 PUP experiment, as only full-time teachers of the College representing the School of Business and Administrative Studies, and the School of General Studies were prepared to participate. The seven Certificate Courses of the former School were chosen because students of these generated a higher-than-normal proportion of queries. In the past, the Auctioneers and Agents Special Course (0649) was subject to the second-highest attrition rate. The ninth course, Diploma Entrance, Stage I (1908) of the School of General Studies had previously suffered the highest attrition rate. This was believed to be due to insincere enrollees desirous of obtaining learning material to assist them to teach or study the latest (annual) syllabuses at oral classes conducted by four other bodies.

/PUP Courses

PUP Courses Investigated

The eight courses of the School of Business and Administrative Studies were surveyed. It was considered that Diploma Entrance was an abnormal attrition case. The PUP reduced enrolments in that course by forty-four per cent (44%), without reducing the students' assignment activity. The abnormality was confirmed in 1976 when enrolments rose (largely because of the running-down of the Department of Education's Adult Evening Classes for Higher School Certificate) somewhat, but the demand for Preliminary Unit Packs tripled, possibly because of the need for information contained in the Course Details Booklet. MacArthur (1975) described a similar effect in his article, "How a Restyled Prospectus Attracted Sixth Formers in Their Thousands".

February 1975

Although the College does not impose closing dates for enrolments, accepting them throughout the year, this is not known universally and, accordingly, enrolments peak in February and March. The PUP was introduced in December 1974 with some timidity. The

/reaction

reaction of applicants had not been assessed. It was feared that its purpose would be misinterpreted as imposing a barrier to studying a course. (Happily, there was no such misinterpretation by applicants, although it was obvious that a number of the officers and teachers of the Department had not read the Preliminary Lesson Unit before forming opinions.)

Because of the fear of misinterpretation and the political repercussions if widespread, Preliminary Unit Packs were not sent to all enquirers in the initial stages of introduction. Two hundred and ninety-one (291) of the 1975 total of two thousand two hundred and forty-one (2,241) new enrolments in the eight courses (i.e., 13%) were processed in February. During the investigation, the sample was reduced to two hundred and eighty-four (284) enrollees due to classification error (5) and loss of working record cards (2). Of the two hundred and eighty-four (284), one hundred and fifty-two (152) had not been sent a PUP and had enrolled without any knowledge of the Preliminary Lesson Unit and its assignments, whilst one hundred and thirty-two (132) had been

/given

given a PUP and submitted the assignments with their enrolment forms (except for two who did not complete the assignments).

From March 1975, applicants were not enrolled in these courses without having gone the PUP route. When the number of courses subject to PUP entry was expanded in 1976, there was no similar phasing-in period. It is unlikely that the College will have another opportunity to follow the progress of two groups enrolling for the same courses at the same time, but following two discrete entry paths.

Similarity of Groups

There was no selection of those enquirers to be sent a PUP. Accordingly, if the groups had been large enough, their profiles should have matched. Even with the small sample (of 284), if the profiles were too dissimilar, it would indicate that the PUP was not having a uniform effect and interpretation of performance results would be hazardous. The Table, "Percentages in Variable Groupings" provides comparisons of the two groups by seven (7) variables.

/Courses

PERCENTAGES IN VARIABLE GROUPINGS

VARIABLE		NORMAL		PUP	
SAMPLED COURSES	0617	7		5	
	0632	7		8	
	0635	11		14	
	0638	36		39	
	0649	19		17	
	0651	8		5	
	1216	4		0	
	1909	8	100	8	100
AGE 18 YRS.	0	1		4	
19	1	7		4	
20-21	2	7		7	
22-25	3	22		19	
26-30	4	24		26	
31-35	5	14		14	
36-40	6	10		9	
41-50	7	11		14	
51-60	8	4	100	3	100
COURSE=OCCUPATION	0	19		24	
	1-4	5		16	
	5	13		8	
	6	11		13	
	7	16		14	
	8	17		15	
	9	19	100	10	100
FORM STANDARD	0-4	14		5	
	5-6	27		23	
	7	27		29	
	8	23		27	
	9	9	100	16	100
FEMALE		16		29	
MALE		84	100	71	100
POST-PRIMARY YRS.	0-3	11		12	
	4	20		13	
	5	18		24	
	6	34		24	
	7	10		11	
	8-9	7	100	16	100
DESPATCH DELAY	0-3	28		33	
	4-6	16		27	
	7-8	11		7	
	9	45	100	33	100

Courses as a Variable

As the greatest difference between the two groups in their dispersal among courses was only three (3) percentage points (0635, 0638 and 0651), the groups are comparable. Figures 1.14 through 1.19 show such a slight difference in performance by courses, that where the groups displayed these slight dissimilarities in enrolment by courses, there could not be a significant effect upon comparability of performance data.

/Enrollees'

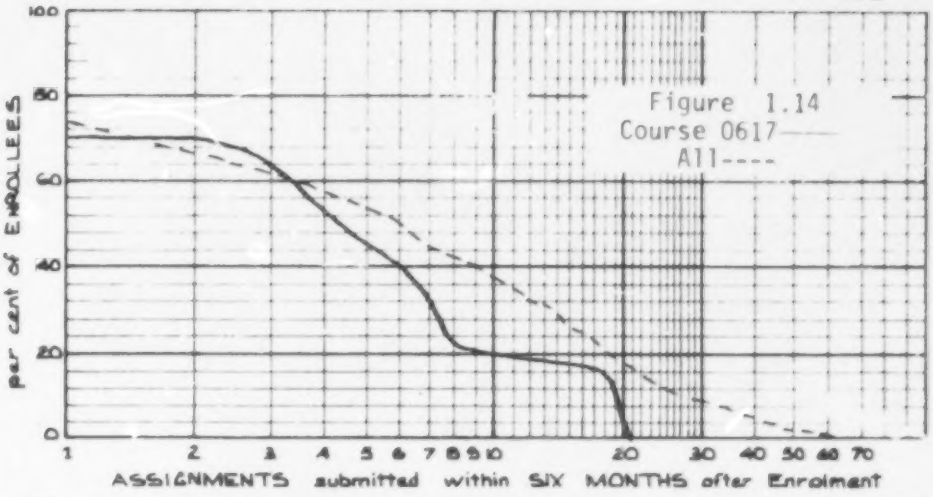


Figure 1.14
Course 0617 ——
All ----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

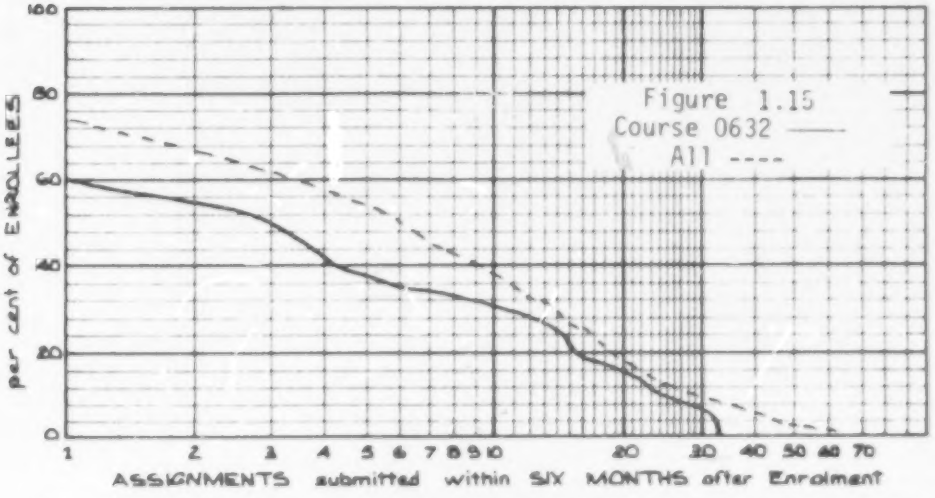


Figure 1.15
Course 0632 ——
All ----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

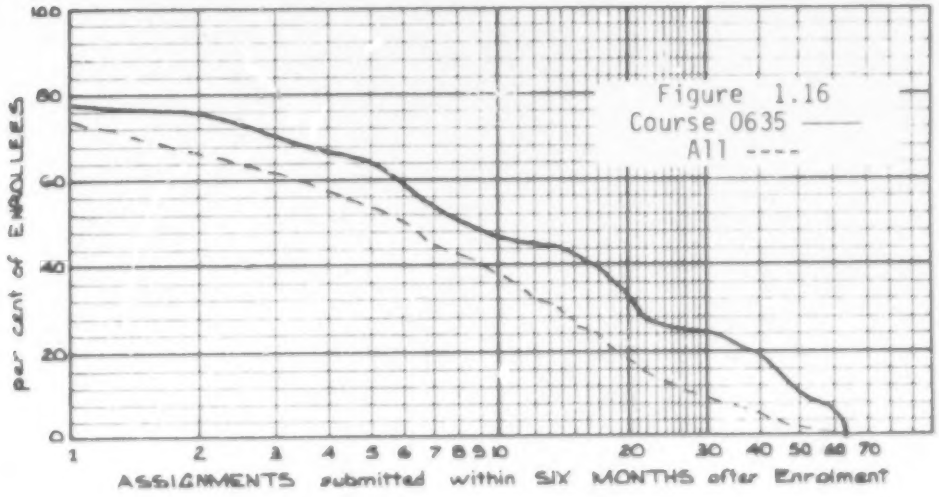


Figure 1.16
Course 0635 ——
All ----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

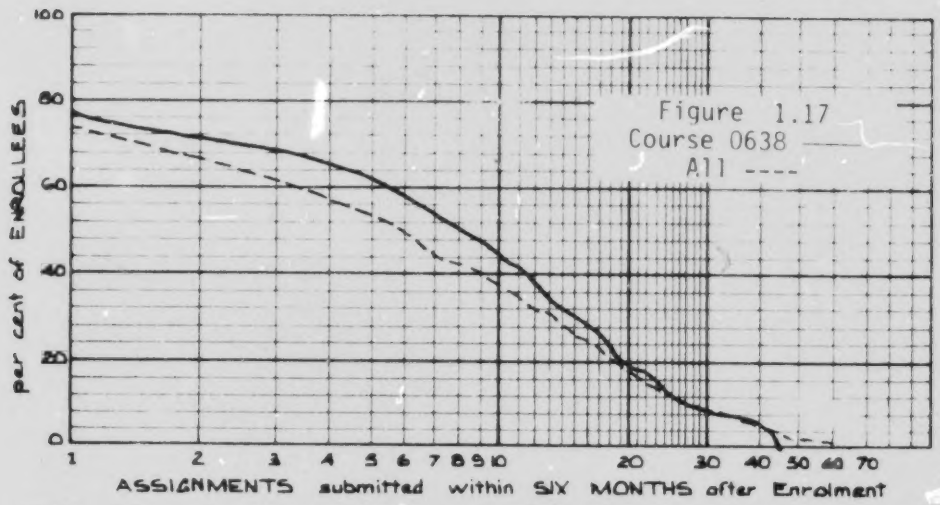


Figure 1.17
Course 0638 ——
All ----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

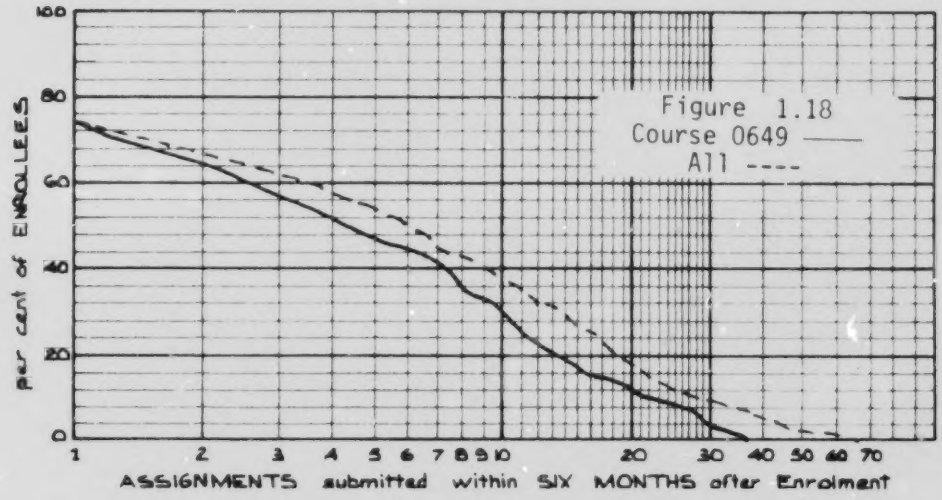


Figure 1.18
Course 0649 ——
All ----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

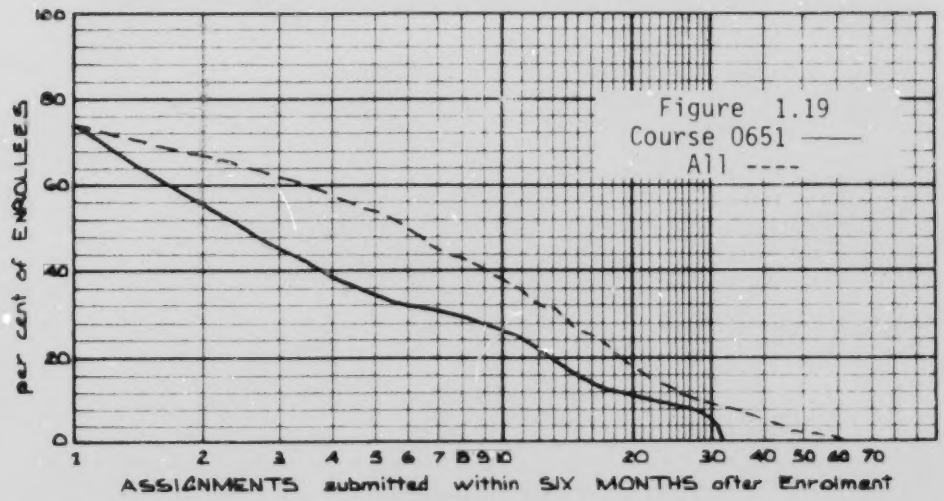


Figure 1.19
Course 0651 ——
All ----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

Enrollees' Ages

Again there is a differential limited to three (3) percentage points. Figure 1.1 illustrates the similarity of the profiles. There is no greater difference between the sums of any two adjoining age groupings, and only one percentage point difference between the two categories of under and over thirty-one years of age.

/Course

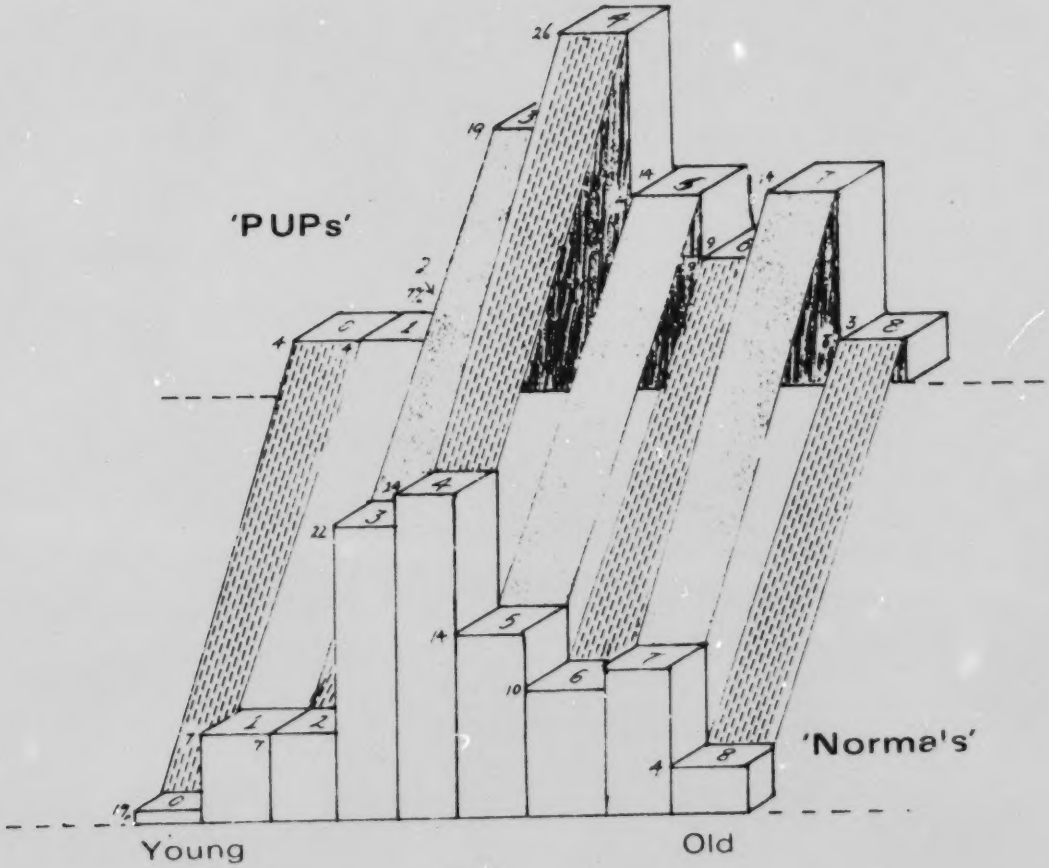


Figure 11

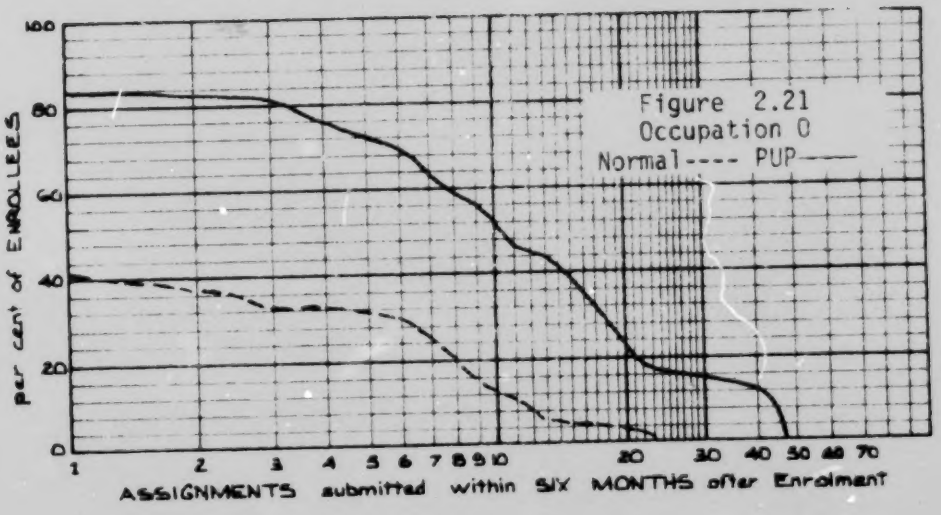
Course Relevance to Occupation

There are considerable differences between the two groups when this variable is tested. There is only slight dissimilarity in the middle (6 and 7) categories. The PUPs show less relevance than the Normals. This may indicate that the PUP, by providing more information about the courses, is showing up differences between the theory and the work experiences of enquirers. It must be remembered that the "scoring" of relevance was mine, and not that of enrollees.

There are only slight differences at the extreme ends (0 and 9) in performances shown by Figures 2.21 and 2.27. The number of the Normals in the Relevance One to Four (1-4) group is so small that Figure 2.22 shows extremes which are not comparable with Figure 2.26 (8). Imprecision in scoring Relevance (and there must be imprecision in measuring current occupation from one or two words) would be expected to be noticeable in adjoining groupings, rather than at the extremities. I cannot effectively explain the differences, and so I cannot insist they may not be

/significant.

significant. Figure 1.2 shows the degree of dissimilarity.



/Enrolment

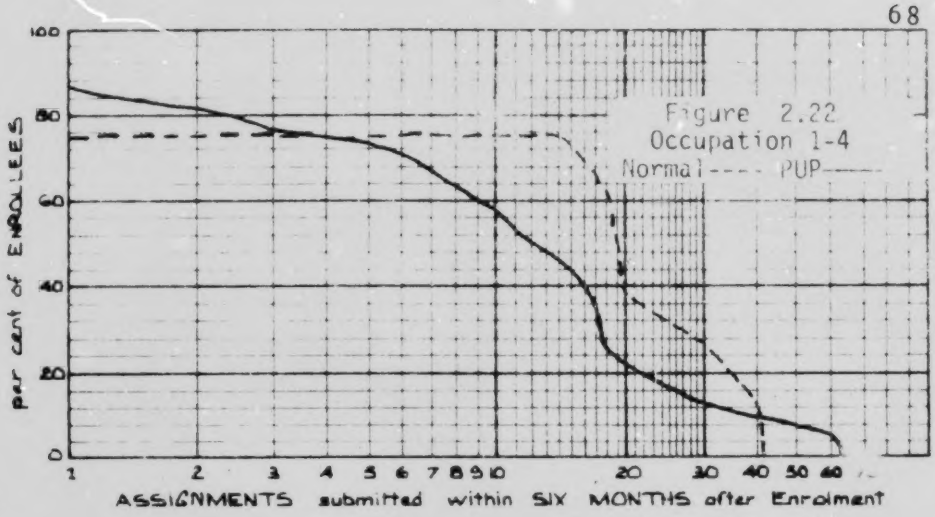


Figure 2.22
Occupation 1-4
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

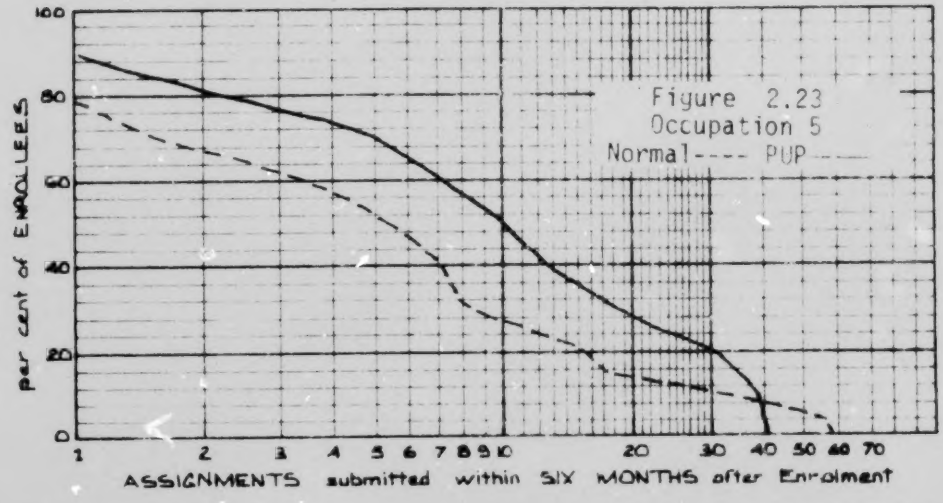


Figure 2.23
Occupation 5
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

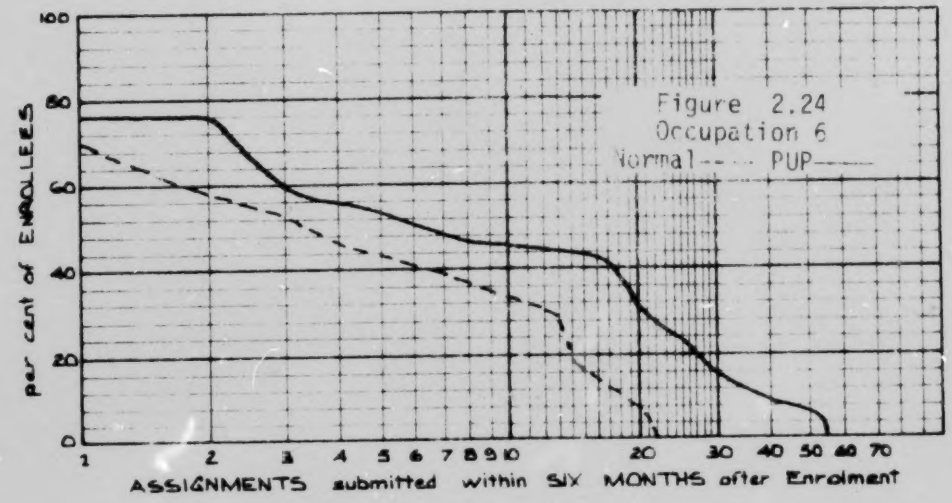
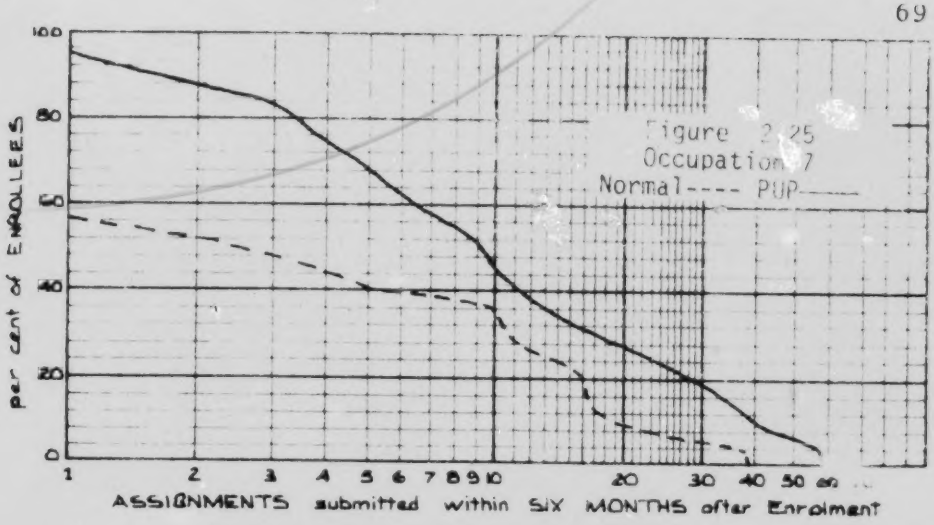
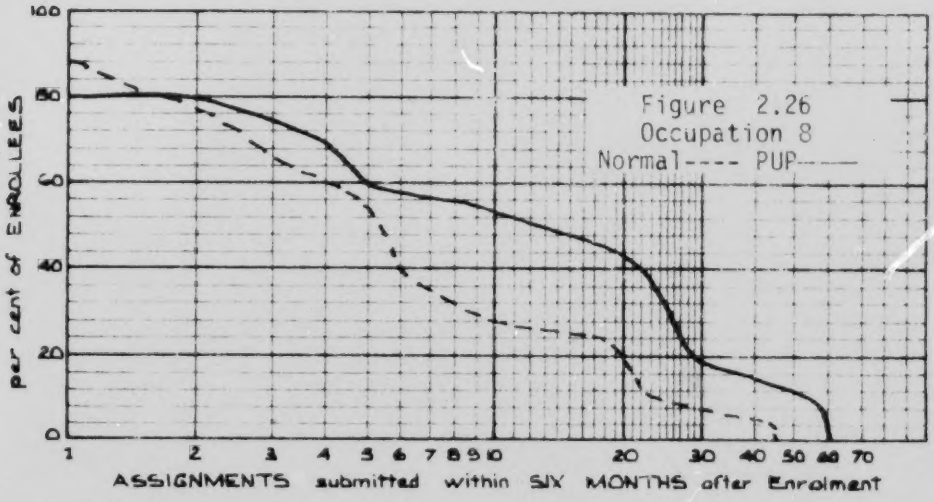
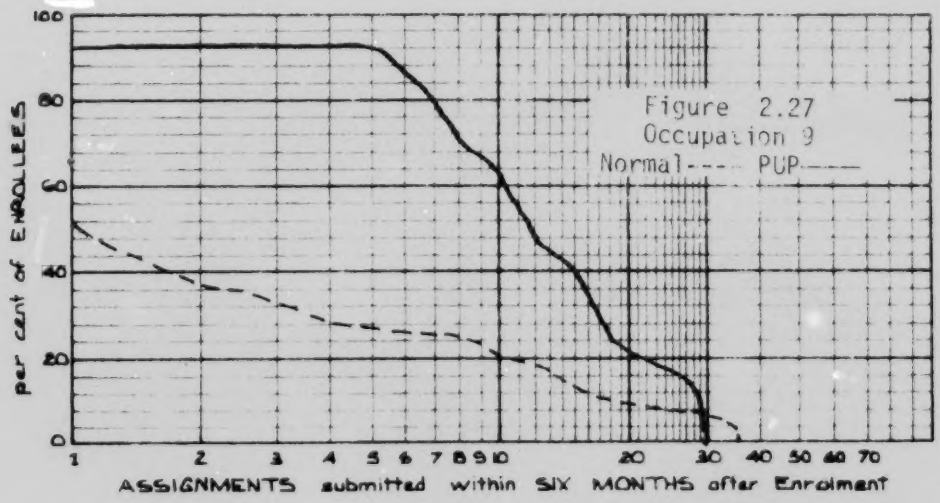


Figure 2.24
Occupation 6
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment


per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment
Figure 2.25
Occupation 7
Normal---- PUP——


per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment
Figure 2.26
Occupation 8
Normal---- PUP——


per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment
Figure 2.27
Occupation 9
Normal---- PUP——

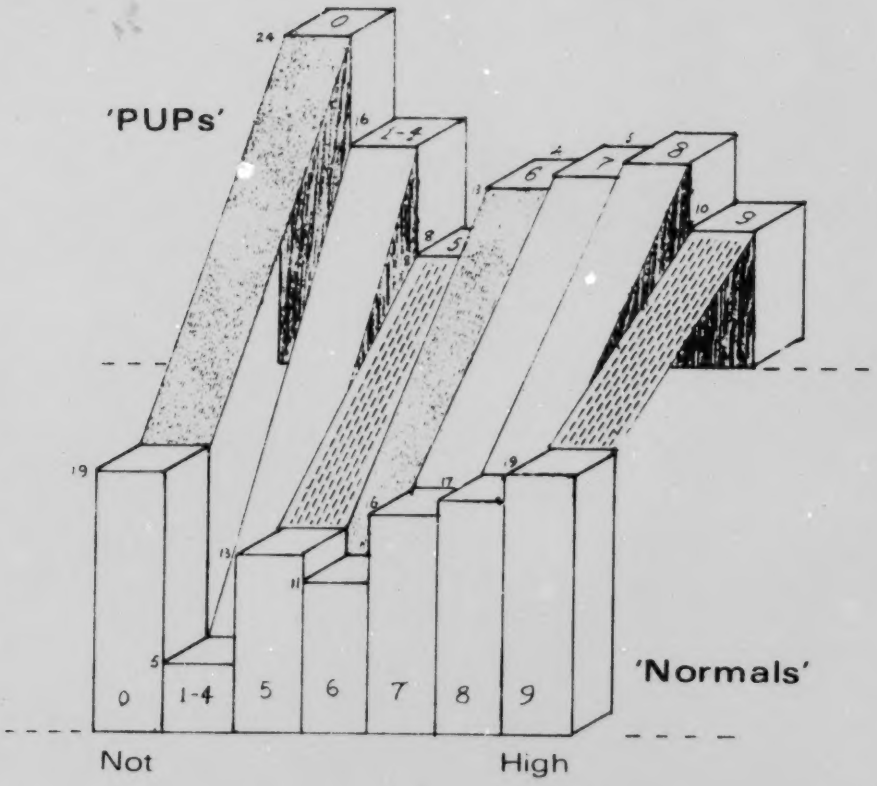


Figure 1.2 Course Relevance to Occupation

Enrolment Form Completion Standard

Figure 1.3 illustrates the differences. This feature is not a random variable as explained in Chapter 7 under the heading "Enrolment Form Standard". Again, the appreciable differences are at the extremes. It was designed that there be a greater difference (improvement) with a uniform upward-shift.

/Sex

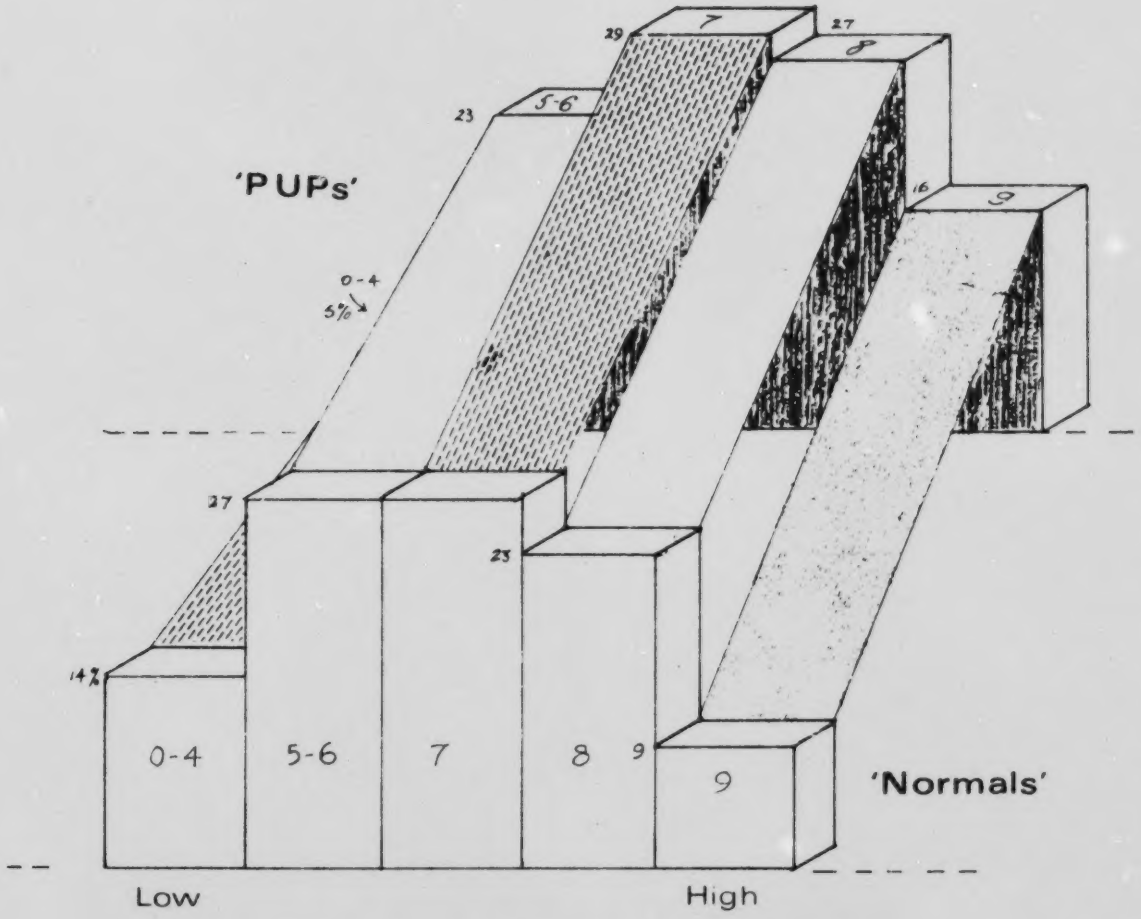
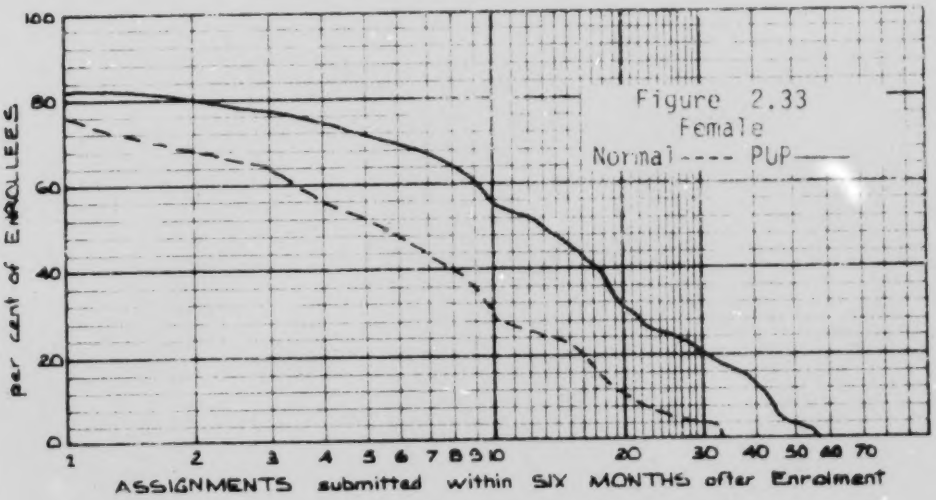


Figure 1.3 Enrolment Form Completion Standard

Sex as a Variable

There was a higher proportion (nearly double) of female PUPs than there were Normals. As with Relevance, the PUP may have given enquirers confidence in their ability to handle self-learning material. Figures 2.35 and 2.36 show slightly lower drop-out by females, but Figure 2.33 indicates that there was only sli[illegible] difference between the non-starter rates of females entering by either route. Their overall numbers were not such as to affect comparability.



/Years

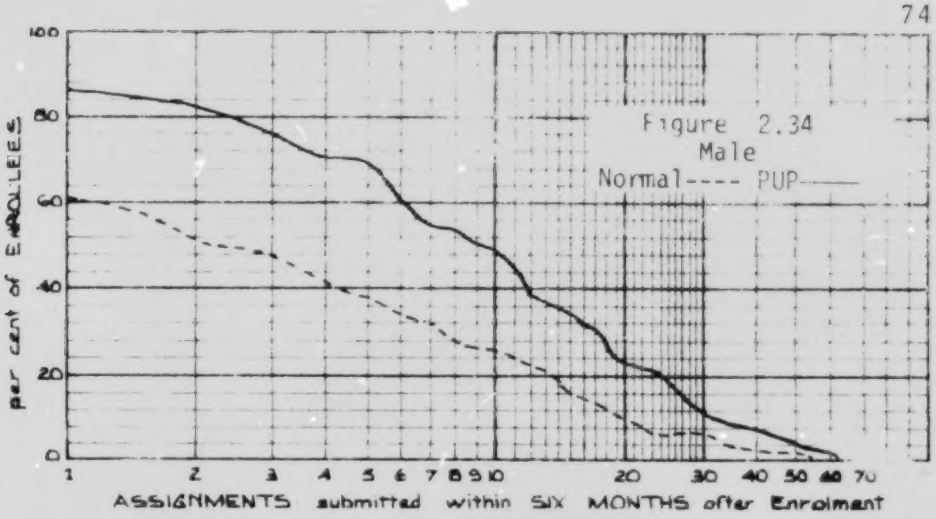


Figure 2.34
Male
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

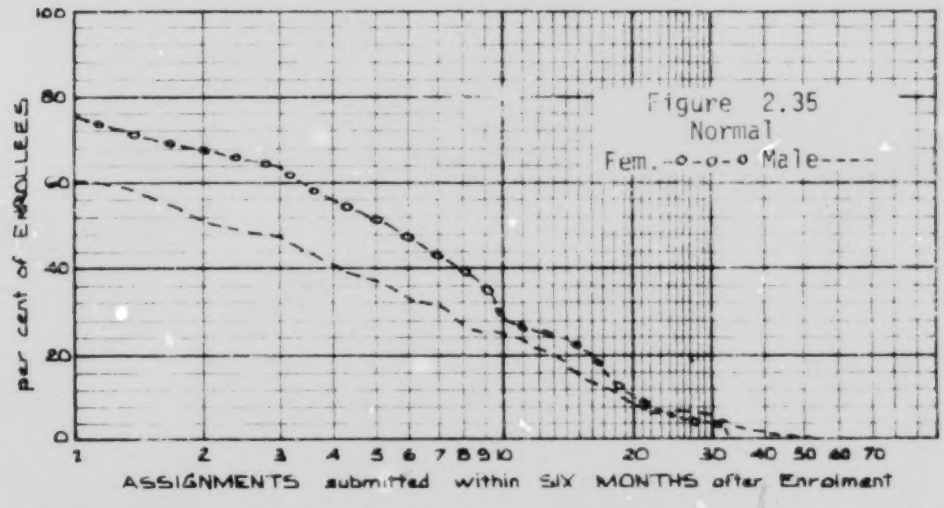


Figure 2.35
Normal
Fem.-o-o-o Male----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

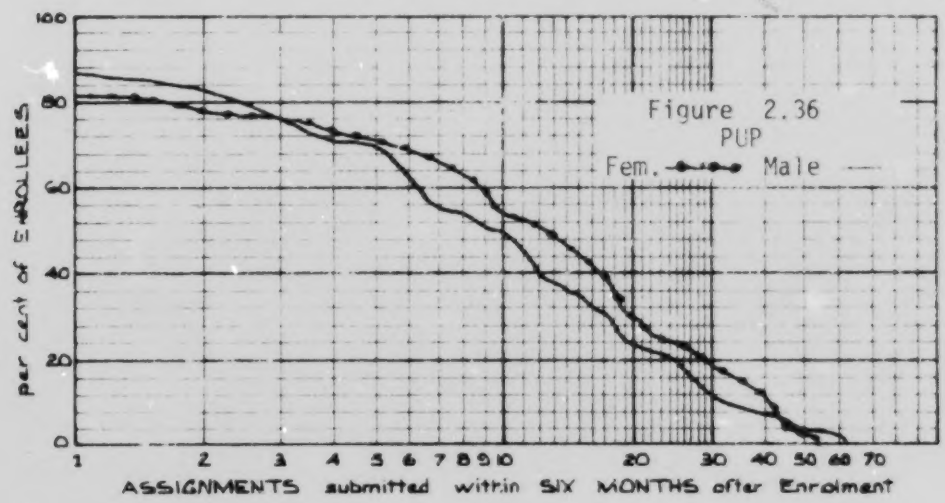


Figure 2.36
PUP
Fem.-•-•-• Male ——
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

Years of Post-Primary Education

The bar-charts in Figure 1.4 indicate rather haphazard differences. There were fewer PUPs with their Higher School Certificate only. There was only one percentage point difference with those who had their School Certificate only, although more PUPs had gone on for one additional year. The number of PUPs who had continued studying beyond the Higher School Certificate balanced the smaller number who had not been awarded that Certificate.

/Despatch

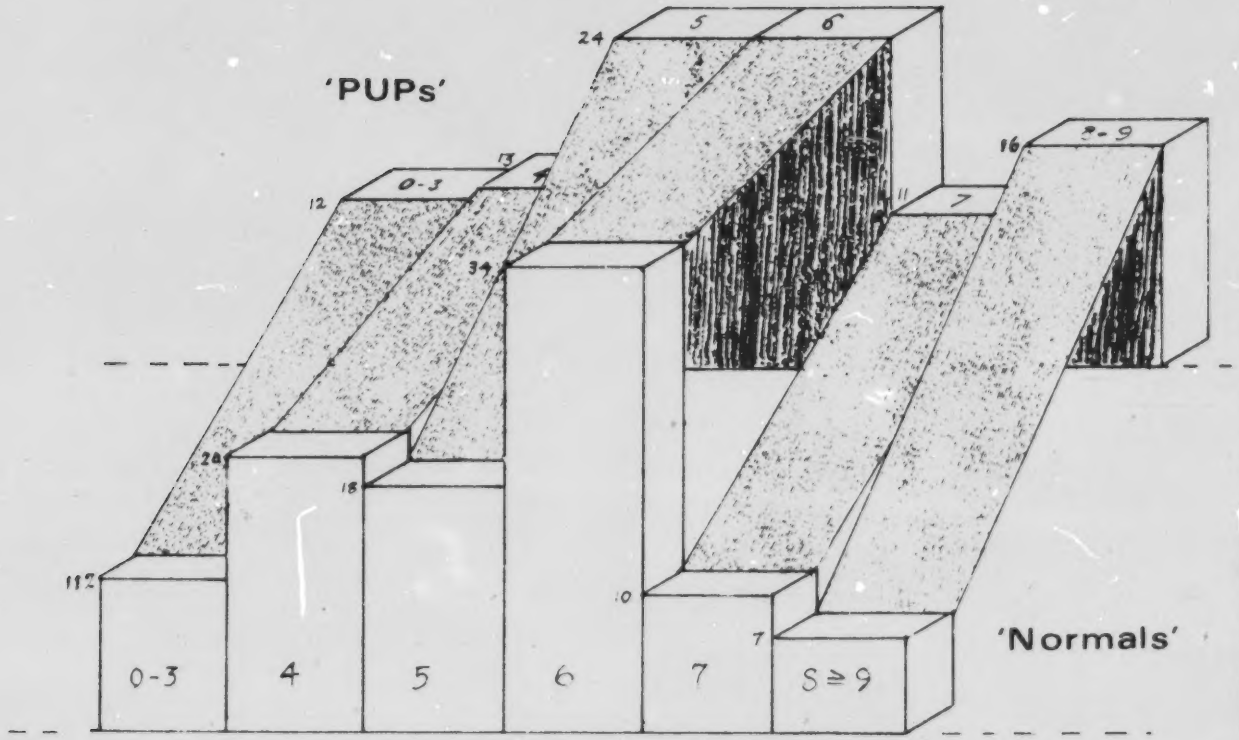
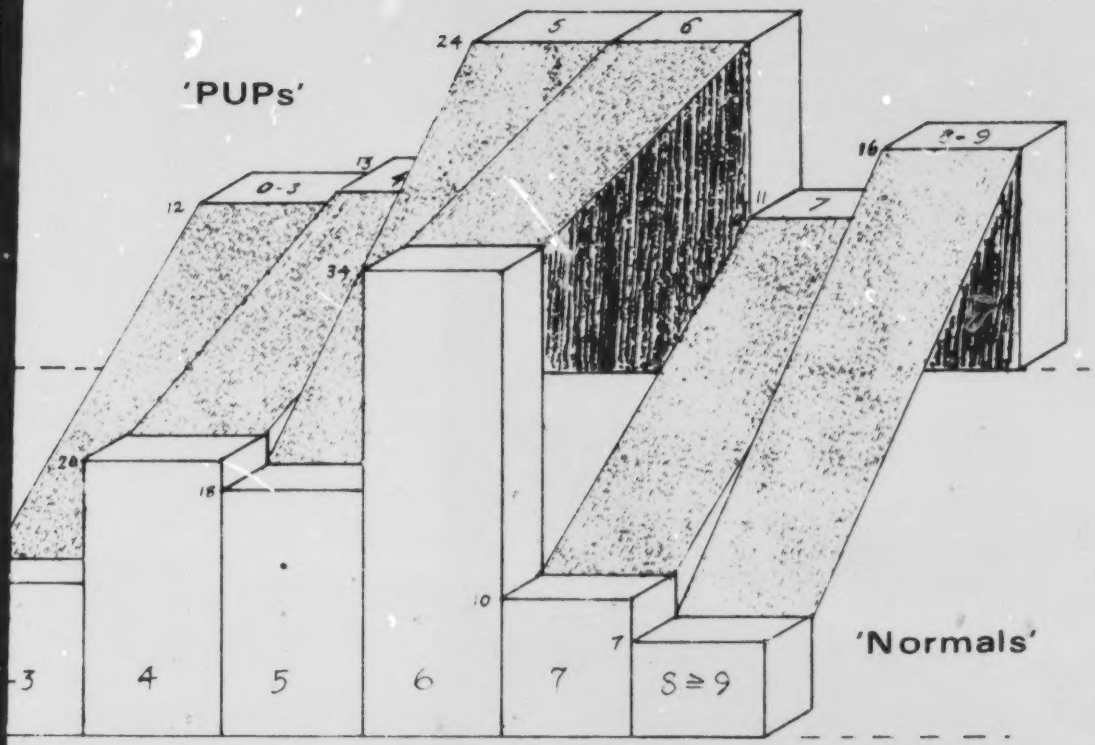


Figure 1.4 Years of Post-Primary Education



Years of Post-Primary Education

76

Despatch Delay

There were longer delays inevitably experienced by the Normals, as the standard First Works Packs required insertion of variable subject synopses and booklists. Figure 2.46 shows there were no vast differences in performance of those who had experienced extremes.

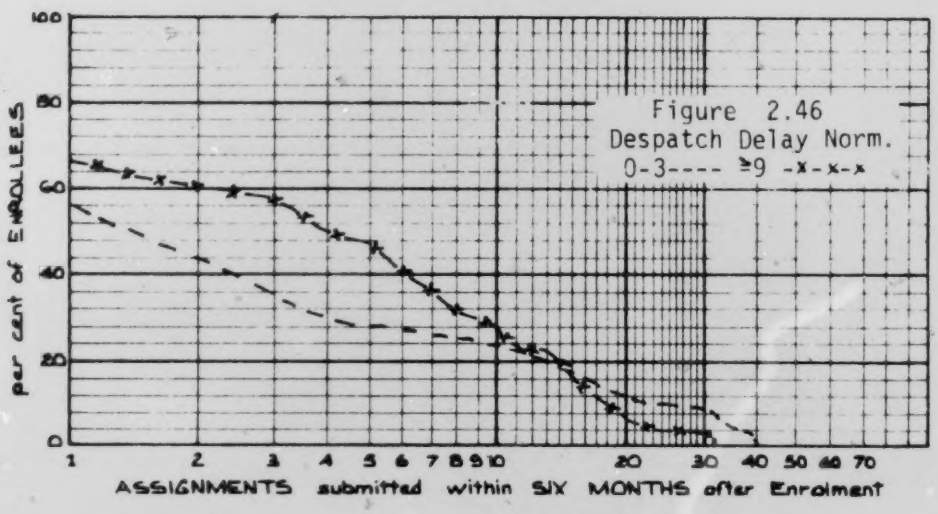


Figure 2.46
Despatch Delay Norm.
0-3---- ≥9 -x-x-x

/Warning

Warning

I personally extracted the data relating to 1975 enrolment and progress. I did not for 1976 data; I specified the "rules" for collection. Regrettably, these rules were excessively complex, and the records too dispersed. Checking has revealed that the 1976 progress data has been understated and, accordingly, the last (twentieth) and third-last (eighteenth) columns of data in the second volume should either be ignored, or dealt with cautiously.

Graphs were prepared to indicate comparative slopes. Progress for the six months after enrolment was chosen for two reasons. An enrollee who was a non-starter at the end of that period remained a non-starter. Generally, only those students who started (first six months) at a faster-than-average pace, increased their pace.

Chapter 6: DID THE PUP WORK?

Introduction

The PUP did work. The outlined objectives were achieved; however, it did not operate in precisely the intended manner, and there were side effects. Generally, these side effects were pleasant, but they were nonetheless disturbing because they were unexpected.

The major side effect was that PUPs submitted their assignments at a faster pace than did the Normals. This was not immediately discernible and created logistical problems of lesson material supply. In most cases, lesson material was revised and printed on a two-year cycle, quantities being based on enrolment data, and re-supply lead-in timing on history of student pace and drop-out.

Reduction in Enrolments

Although total first enrolments of the College in 1975 dropped by only one per cent (1%) on 1974 figures, those in non-PUP-entry courses increased by

/ten per cent

ten per cent (10%), whilst those in PUP-entry courses dropped by twenty-two per cent (22%). Those in the PUP-entry courses of the School of Business and Administrative Studies dropped by only seven per cent (7%). Details follow:

1975 First-Enrolment Change cf. 1974

Course	%age Change
0617	+ 6.17
0632	- 5.76
0635	- 0.55
0638	+ 24.62
0649	- 36.20
0651	+ 35.71
1206	- 42.11
1919	- 58.59
All Above	- 6.80
D.E.	- 44.36
All PUP	- 21.79
Non-PUP	+ 10.07
Total	- 1.10

Although records of the number of Preliminary Unit Packs despatched were maintained in 1975, similar

/details

details were not available for previous years. Without comparable enquirer/enroller rates by courses, it is not possible to say with certainty that there was a reduction in the proportion of enrollers to enquirers or its extent. It would appear as if there had been such a reduction; but, in view of the substantial swings in some course-enrolments, there can be no certainty.

Reduction in Post-Enrolment Queries

There was no empirical measure of variation in queries from students. Certainly there was a considerable reduction in the extent of individualized letters which were sent to them, but there had been a general concerted effort to use stock paragraphs and letters with a view to increasing clarity of communication, commencing two months prior to the introduction of packs.

Reduction of the Non-Starter Rate

The non-starter rate of the PUPs was fourteen per cent (14%), whilst that of the Normals was thirty-seven per cent (37%). The non-starter rate had been reduced

/by sixty-

by sixty-one per cent (61%).

It could be argued that comparison between the non-starters of formal subject assignments is invalid because all of the PUPs were starters in the sense that they had all completed the assignments to the Preliminary Lesson Unit. The only counter to that argument is an administrative one. Account can be taken only of those who actually enrol. The resources of the College were not expended upon the non-starters who did not enrol and, accordingly, the desired objective was achieved.

Not one applicant who completed the assignments to a Preliminary Lesson Unit received any adverse comment on those assignments. This must have helped instil, or increase their, confidence in their abilities. Although this would have been at the expense of making some over-confident, it is reasonable to suppose that the added confidence was a major factor in reducing the non-starter rate.

From a social or political viewpoint, it could

/be felt

be felt that barriers to enrolment were placed in the way of genuine students. Is it reasonable to imagine that these "genuine students" who did not submit PUP assignments would have submitted their first subject-assignment?

Retention of Enthusiasm to Enrol

The College does not impose an "enrolment period" or enrolment closing date upon applicants. Enrolments are accepted throughout the year. From experience in 1974, deferring applicants and enrollees deterred a proportion, but there were no indications that those deterred by delay were more likely not to start, or to drop out, than those who were not deterred. There did not appear to be any significant difference between attrition rates of the latter and of those who were not deferred.

Packs were despatched on the same day an enquiry was received by mail or phone. Applicants responded promptly. A sampling check indicated that more than seventy per cent (70%) of applicants (note, not enquirers) responded within one week of receiving the

/pack

pack. Initial lesson material was despatched to one-third of enrollees within three days of receipt of enrolment applications, and to two-thirds within eight days.

Despatch Delay	Normal		PUP	
days	%		%	
0-3	28		33	
4-6	16		27	
7-8	11		7	
≥9	45	100	33	100

Although it is difficult to imagine a measure of effectiveness in achieving this objective, every effort was made to process enquiries and enrolments speedily. It was disappointing to note (Figures 2.46 and 2.47) little difference in performance between enrollees whose enrolment was processed quickly (0-3 days) and those who were delayed to some extent (9 or more days). There may have been more contrast if the range of delays had been greater.

/Reduction

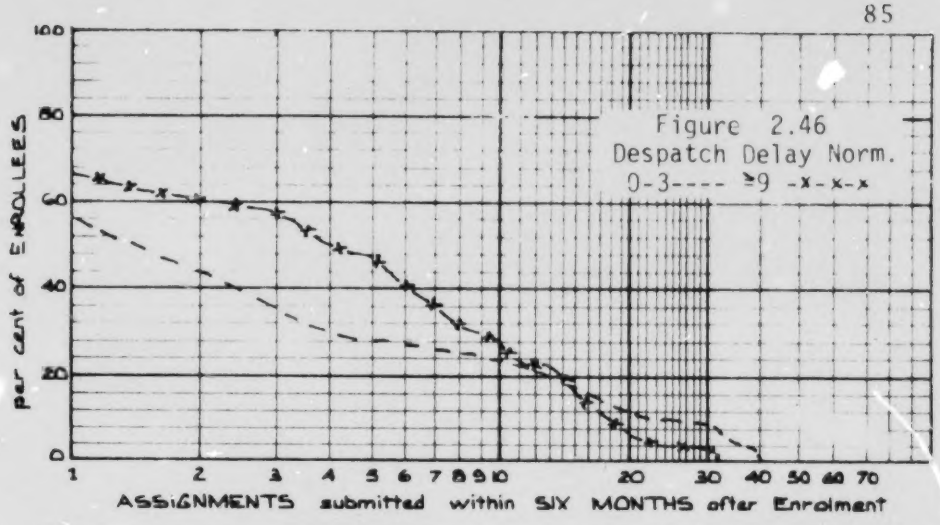


Figure 2.46
Despatch Delay Norm.
0-3---- ≥9 -x-x-x
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

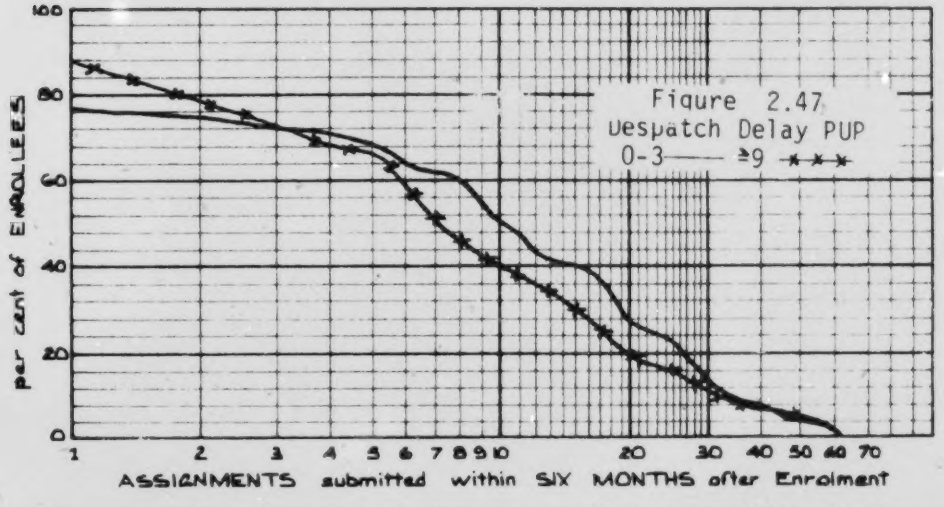


Figure 2.47
Despatch Delay PUP
0-3—— ≥9 -x-x-x
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

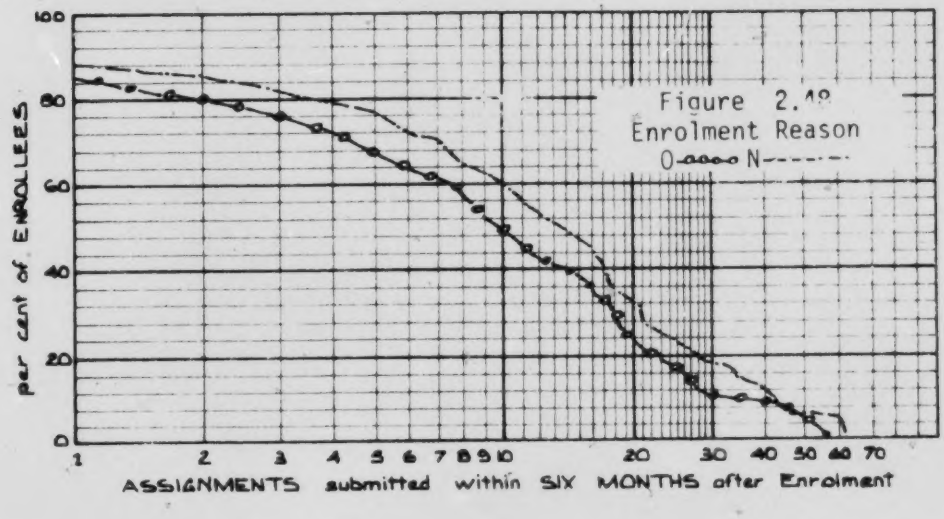


Figure 2.48
Enrolment Reason
O-oooo N------
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

Reduction of Error-Rate

Certainly the errors were fewer but it is doubtful if this can be attributed to system design. Full-time teachers, who were involved in the FUP design and hence enthusiastic, played a large part in shepherding the enrolments through and setting an example of concern. In view of the poorer performance in the following year (1976), it could be considered that design and training were not enough, greater interest (in supervision and checking) was indispensable.

Effect on Drop-Out

Because (all except 0649 of) the courses were of four stages with a normal completion time of five years, it is much too early to calculate drop-out. An indication can be gained, however, from the comparative proportions of starters who had not completed in 1975 but did not re-enrol in 1976. (This is indicated in the tabulated data by a dash in the last column, a digit, not zero, in the fourth-last column, where that digit is not equal to that in the second-last column.) Twenty-one per cent (21%) of the Normals who started but did not complete dropped-

/out,

out, whereas only eight per cent (8%) of the PUPs did. These are certain drop-outs and, in time, much higher proportions will waste away. There is no reason to suppose that the proportion of later wastage of PUPs will be any less than that of the Normals. Accordingly, whilst the initial difference appears spectacular (21% to 8%), it is likely that thirteen per cent (13%) will remain the differential.

Some of the results are "too good". If drop-out potential is reduced by fast pace, the reduction in drop-out would not be due directly to method of entry but, rather, to pace which appears to have been increased by the PUP entry.

Summary

The prime objective of reduction of the non-starter rate, with consequent saving of administrative resources, was achieved. Whilst other benefits did flow, there had not been adequate planning to enable testing. There had been no time for any form of pre-testing; in fact, it is likely that if this had been done initial enthusiasm could have been lost.

/In

In retrospect, it is considered that staff attitudes had been more important than logical system design.

Chapter 7: DROP-OUT PREDICTORS

Introduction

Anderson (1972, p.118) points out that,

> A vast amount of educational research has been devoted to the evaluation of alternative (to matriculation examinations) predictors such as motivation and personality measures, tests of general ability and scholastic aptitude, and interviews.

There has been little success. What, then, of the more readily measurable factors? In an attempt to find a discriminator for prevention and cure of drop-out, let us consider:

Age
Course Relevance to Occupation
Enrolment Form Standard
Sex
Educational Level on Entry
Stated Reason for Enrolment
Course Load.

/Age

Age

From the literature it appeared certain that the correspondence mode was less successful with the younger adult. Hall (1975) found from the junior college group he surveyed that the under twenty-ones had a greater than average tendency to drop-out, whilst the over thirty-fives showed the greatest persistence. Donehower's (1968) findings were similar. She found that the older the correspondence student was on enrolment, the greater was his chance of survival; those under twenty years of age formed the highest risk group, whilst those over fifty-five had the highest completion rate.

Bradley and Lehman (1975, p.11) found a higher proportion of the younger students dropping-out and suggested that "mentors might argue that not all students are ready for or prepared to handle independent study". This contention could hardly be justified in view of the most successful category of correspondence students - the externals undertaking primary-school level studies throughout the world.

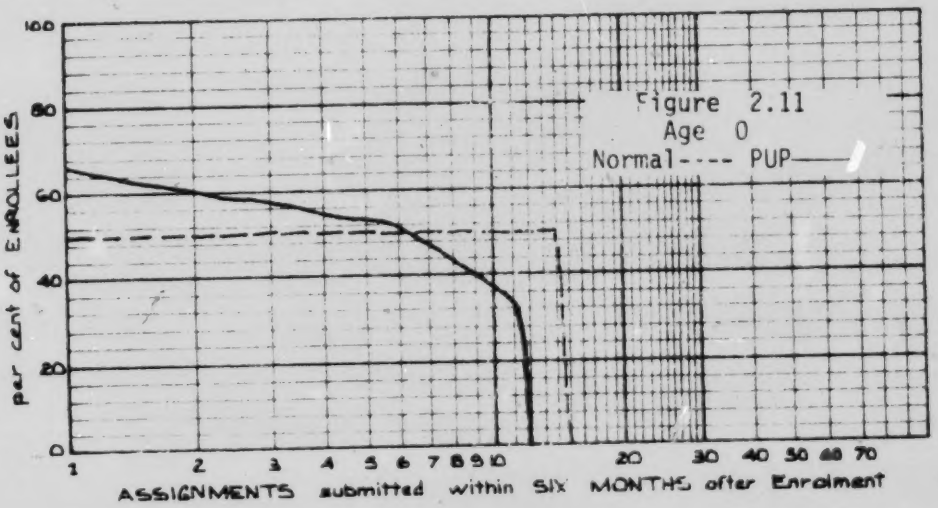
/Traditional

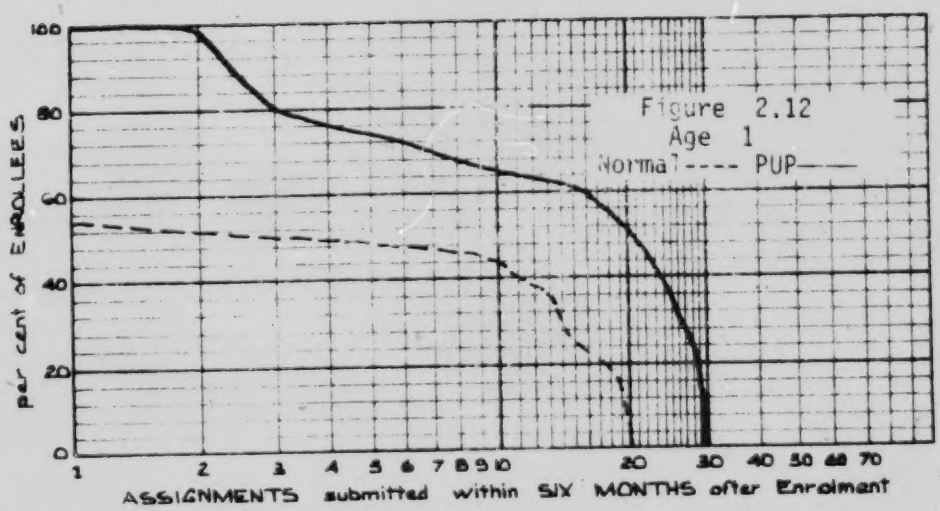
Traditional compulsory education systems inevitably generate dependence of pupils; so often they are told what to learn, when to learn it and how. There appears to be little doubt that, to be successful in completion, a correspondence student must break these ties of dependency and become able to determine his own learning needs and programme.

Dearling (1965, p.52), in writing of independent study, gave "the most familiar reason for academic failure in the first year of college (as) ... dependence"; dependence upon the teacher and dependence upon the spoken word. In an attempt to make applicants aware of this the sample lesson unit chosen for inclusion in the first Preliminary Lesson Unit was dealing with law, whilst the second dealt with precis writing; both stressed the importance of precision in writing. There appears to be considerable merit in the contention of Brainard, Jackson and Thomas (1973, p.55) that many younger adult students are "living a schizophrenic existence" stemming from a dependence-independence conflict. Bhatnagar (1975, p.158) found greatest persistence in

/the twenty-six

the twenty-six to thirty-five age group with higher drop-out in the under-twenty-five and the over-thirty-six groups. Older students who have been away from formal education for a considerable time are, perhaps, too impatient to faithfully follow the slow narrow learning-path traced with the less-mature student in mind.





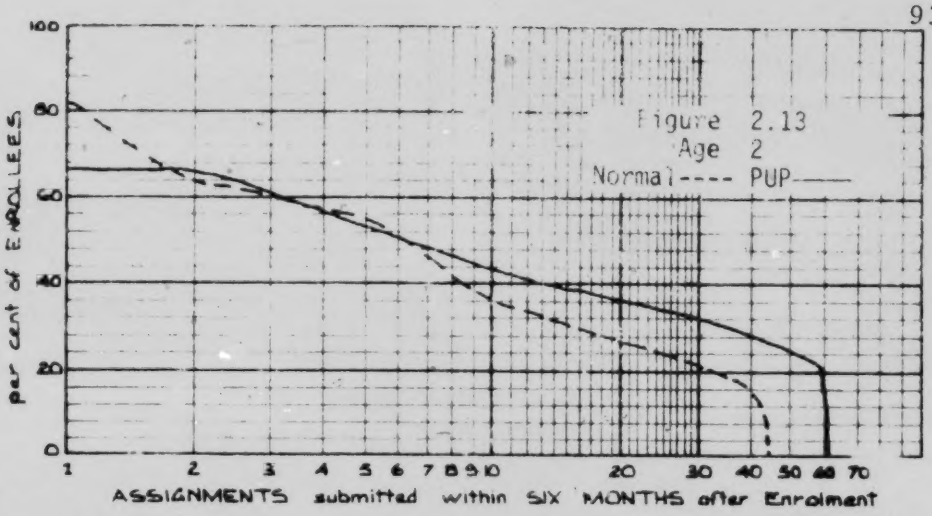


Figure 2.13
Age 2
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

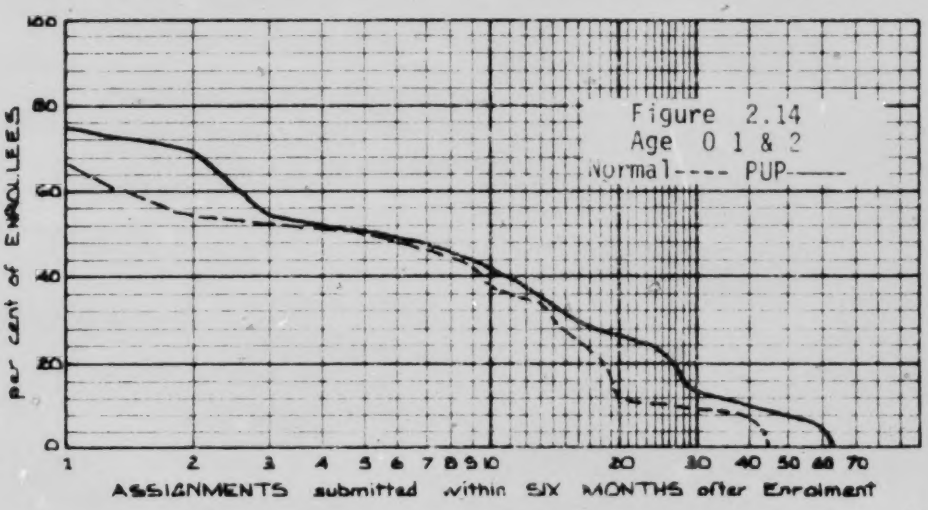


Figure 2.14
Age 0 1 & 2
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

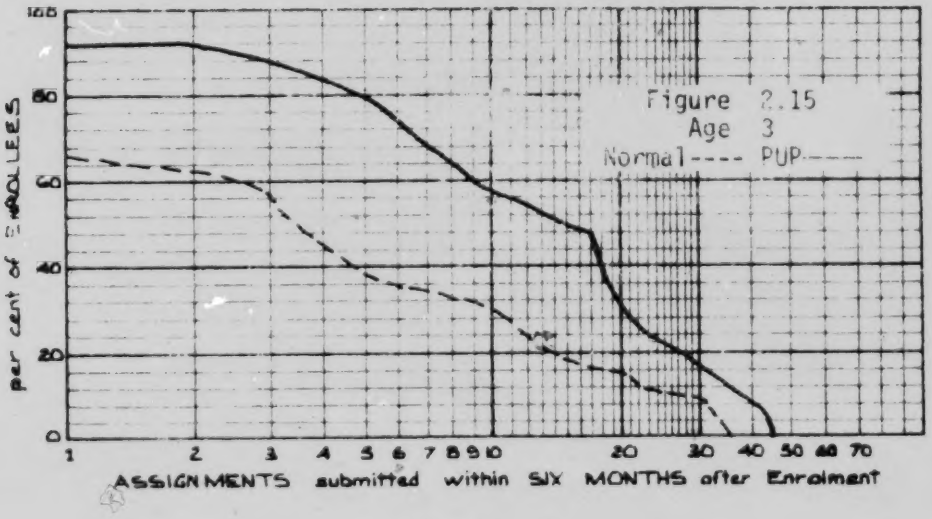


Figure 2.15
Age 3
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

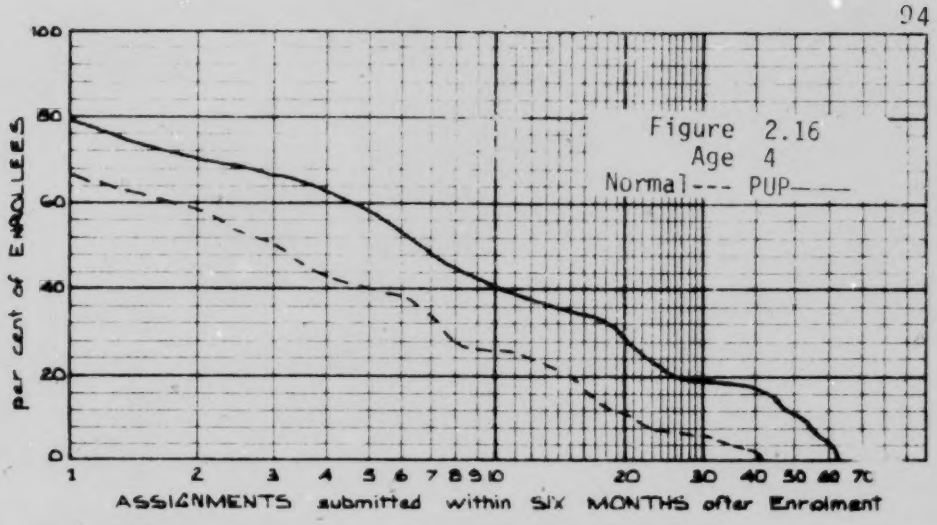


Figure 2.16
Age 4
Normal--- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

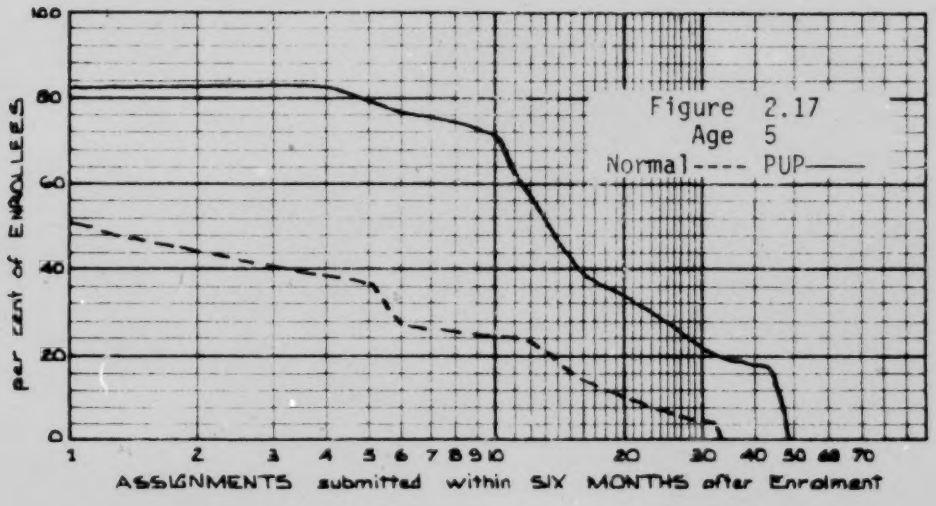


Figure 2.17
Age 5
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

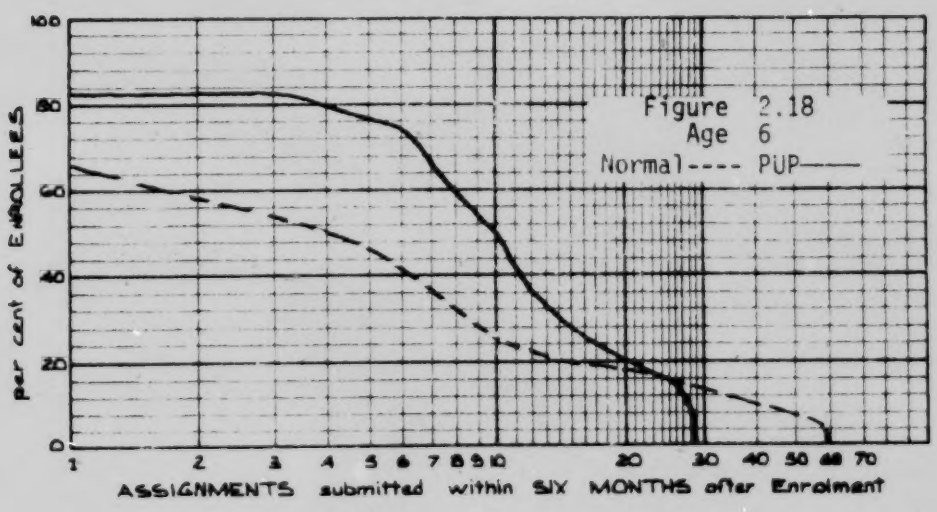
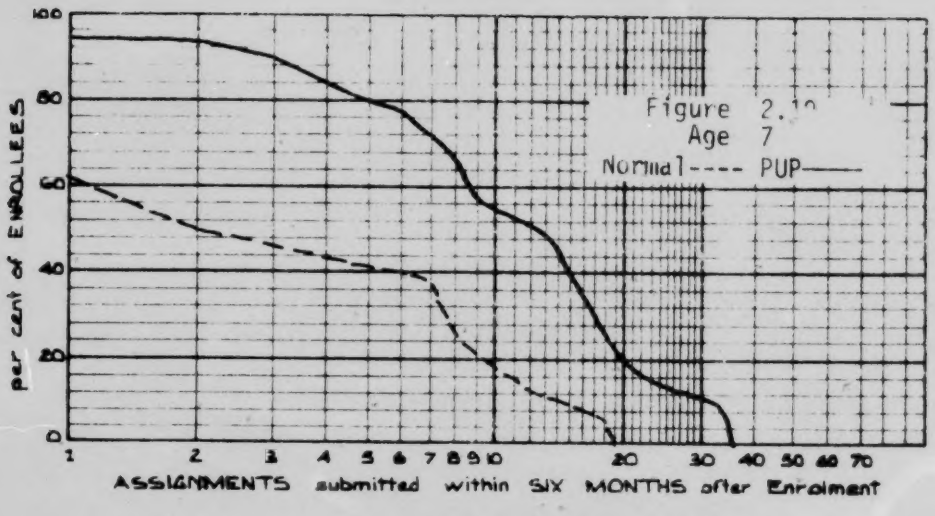
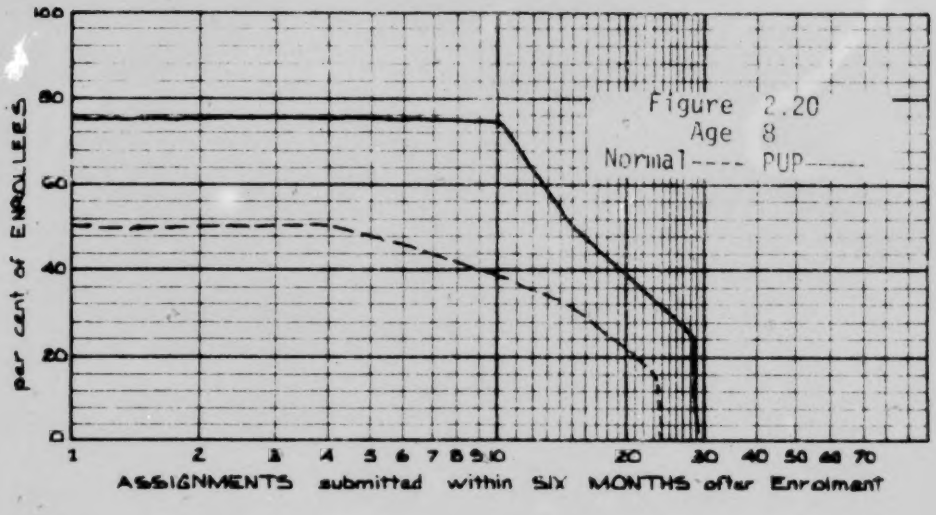


Figure 2.18
Age 6
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment


per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment
Figure 2.19
Age 7
Normal---- PUP——


per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment
Figure 2.20
Age 8
Normal---- PUP——

Performance graphs by age-groupings are shown in Figures 2.11 through 2.20. Looking first at the Normals, the twenty and twenty-one year-olds (Age 2) indicated the greatest tenacity and the highest starter rate. Again, with the PUPs the same age group displayed the greatest tenacity. Those over thirty-six years had the highest drop-out rates.

Regrettably, the samples of the youngest and oldest are very small and there are no clear patterns shown with rising age.

Course Relevance to Occupation

It is natural that a technical education system, with a long history of training apprentices, would consider that preference should be given, in enrolment in oral classes, to applicants for courses related to their jobs. TAFE courses are, in the main, mounted as a result of "advice" from Advisory Committees and Councils whose members are drawn from employer and, to a lesser extent, trade union groups. A proportion of TAFE courses require an occupational prerequisite. On the face of it, this attitude appears logical; it

/would

would be thought that theoretical training would complement on-the-job experience (and vice versa) to heighten learning and acquisition of skills. Balov (1968, pp.28-29) commenting on the Soviet scene (where one-half of the technician and technologist training of a formal nature is by correspondence) gives "the lack of necessary working conditions" as a reason for students dropping out.

It could be, however, that the complexity and specialization of modern commerce and industry has meant that the work experiences (from week to week) of no two students in the same vocational classroom would be similar. The days when a junior started in the mail room, advanced to filing, to recording, to selecting stock letters, to individualized correspondence, to supervision, and finally to management, appear to be gone for good. Modern education systems are stratifying their "output" in such a sophisticated way and there are many intake levels of employment to match.

It would have been thought that those who were

/commencing

commencing a course, completion of which would lead to almost automatic promotion or salary increase, would be more highly motivated and less prone to dropping-out. On the other hand, those who were not commencing for these reasons could be expected to have a higher drop-out potential, but a higher starter rate.

Figure 2.48 indicates that there is no significant performance difference between PUPs who gave occupational (O) reasons as the main reason for enrolling, and PUPs who did not (N). The attrition of the latter was slightly less. My subjective scoring of degree of relevance between applicant's occupation and the course for which he applied (Figures 2.21 through 2.27) gave perplexing results. The performance of PUPs was spectacularly better than that of the Normals at the extremes (no relevance, 0, and maximum relevance, 9). This might be due to PUPs having been able to assess course relevance to their individual needs. PUPs of a relevance-index of 7 had the highest starter rate, of 8, the greatest retention rate. With the Normals, those of index 8 were the best starters, whilst those of indices 1 to 4 had the best holding power.

/This data

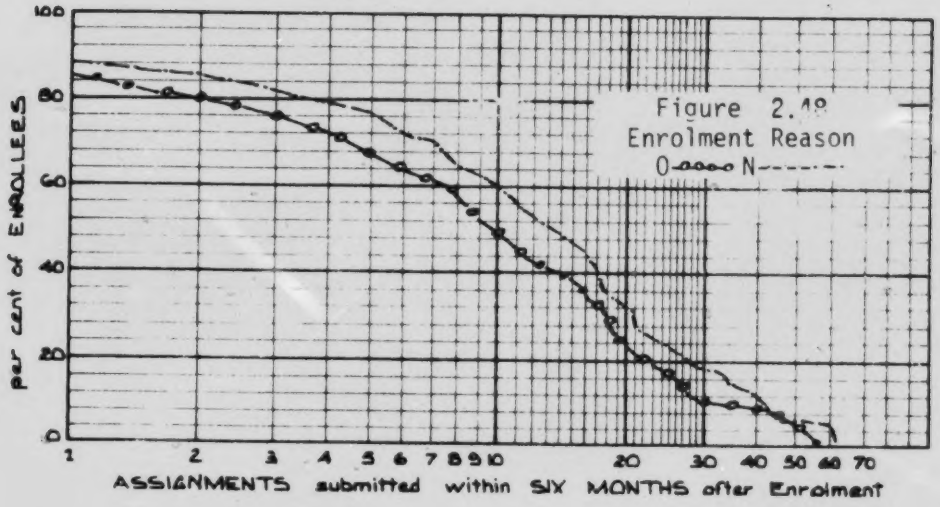


Figure 2.19
Enrolment Reason
O----- N------
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

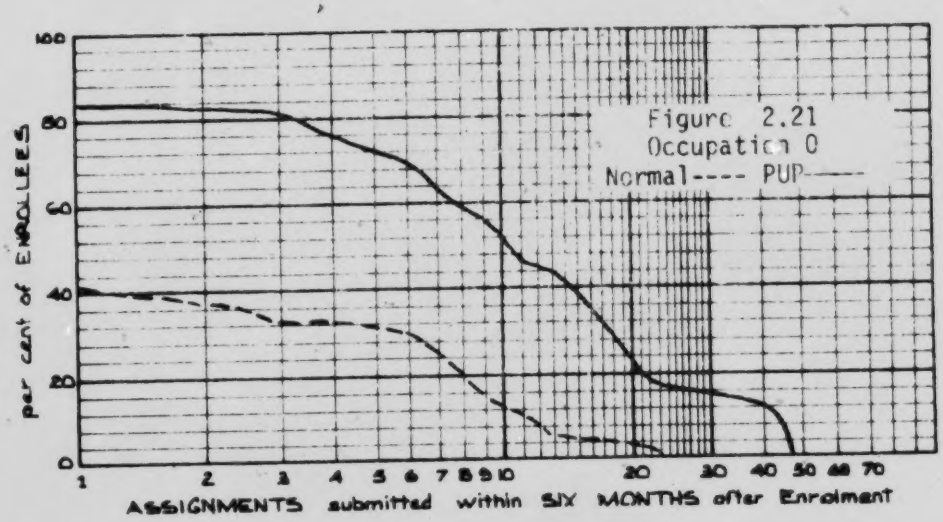


Figure 2.21
Occupation O
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

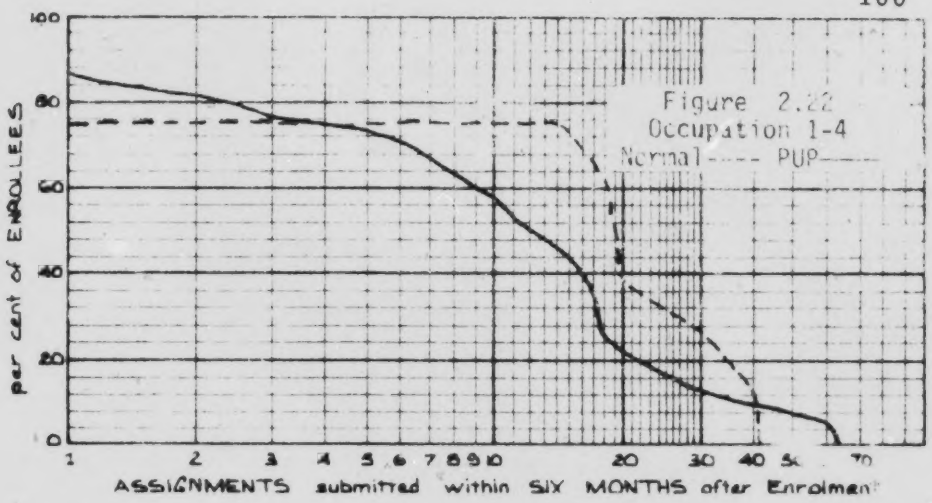


Figure 2.22
Occupation 1-4
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

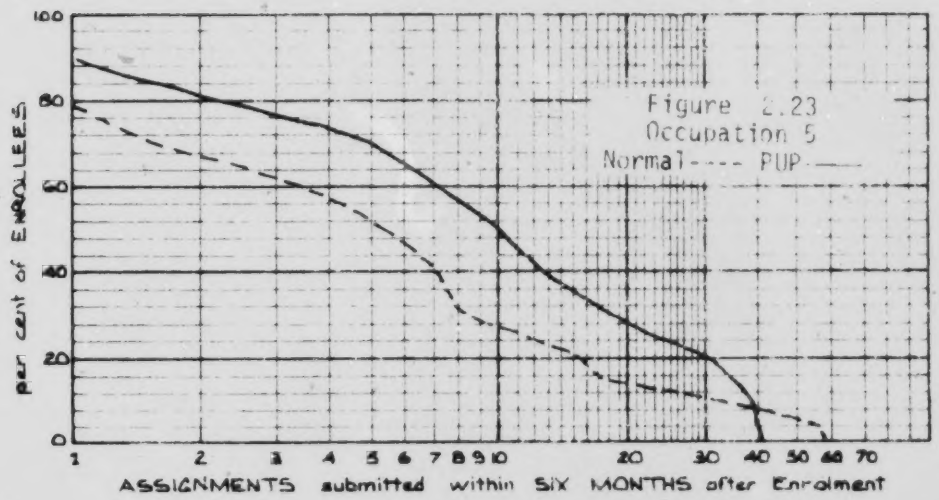


Figure 2.23
Occupation 5
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

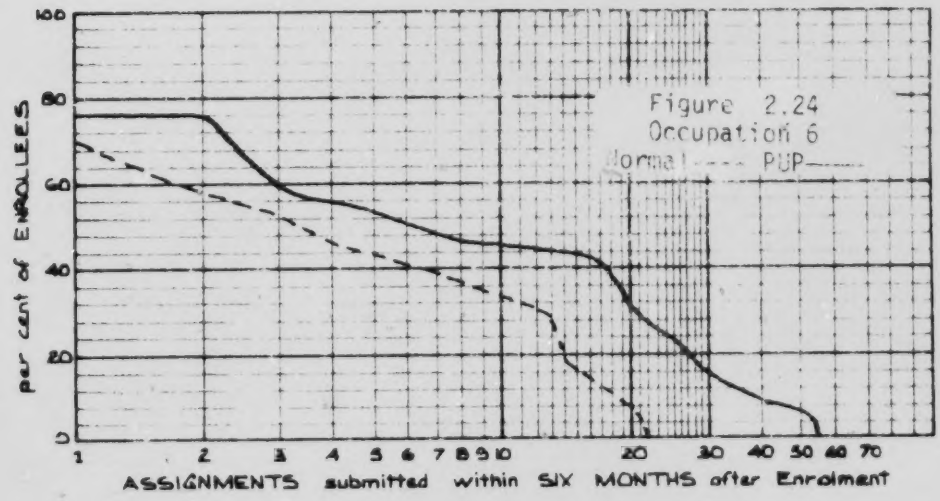


Figure 2.24
Occupation 6
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

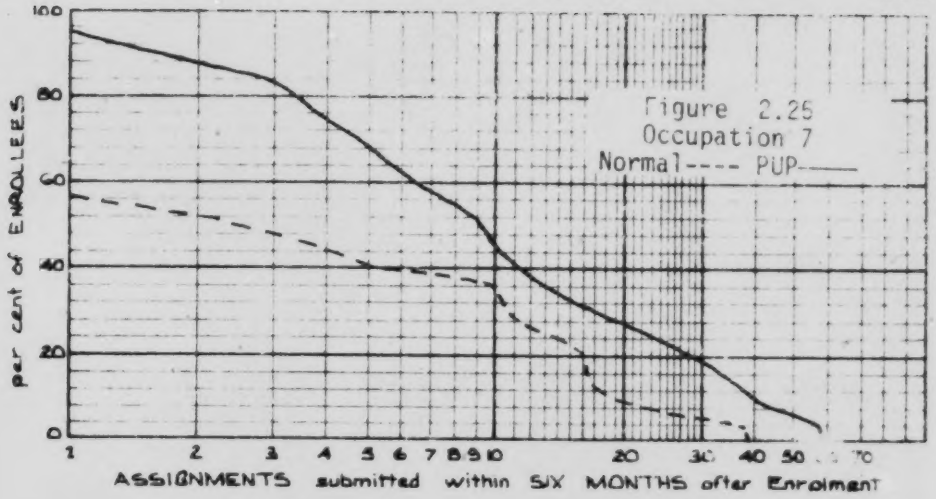


Figure 2.25
Occupation 7
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

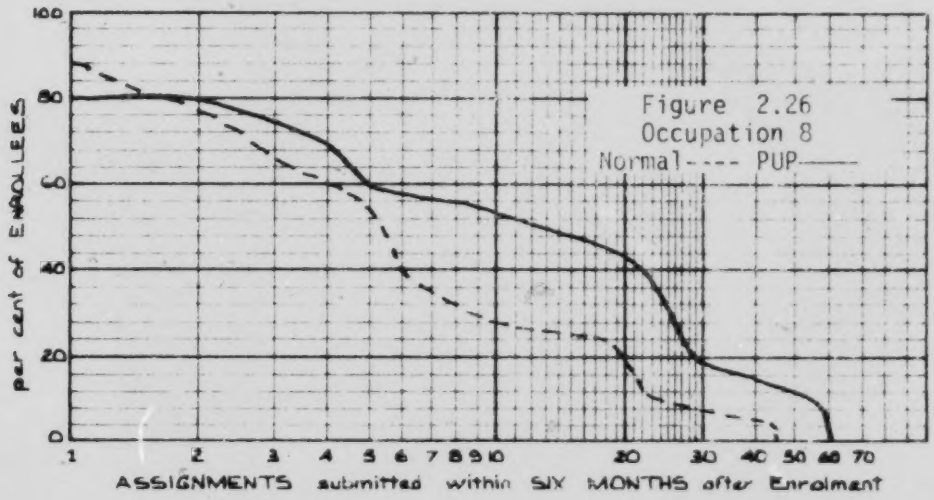


Figure 2.26
Occupation 8
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

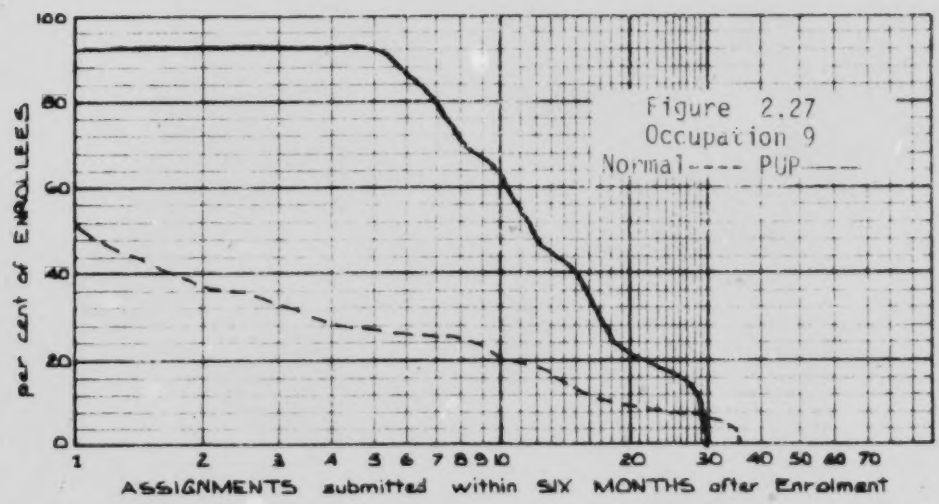


Figure 2.27
Occupation 9
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

This data indicates that where enrolment is by the normal path of application on the basis of little information from the institution, relevance is not a predictor. For those entering with detailed course knowledge, closeness of occupation to course, short of a near-perfect match, could forecast low attrition risk.

Form Standard

Old hands at external studies administration have often preached that a student's performance could be predicted from the care he took in completion of an enrolment form; he would be likely to take his studies seriously if he treated the form seriously. Figure 2.28 certainly shows an earlier roll-off for the "worst" group (0-4 standard), and the data of the small group of nineteen reveals that except for five, the roll-off was permanent. Counselling or other special attention appears justified for these few extreme cases who appear to lack concentration or an understanding of terse written English.

There are not any noteworthy differences between

/Figures 2.29

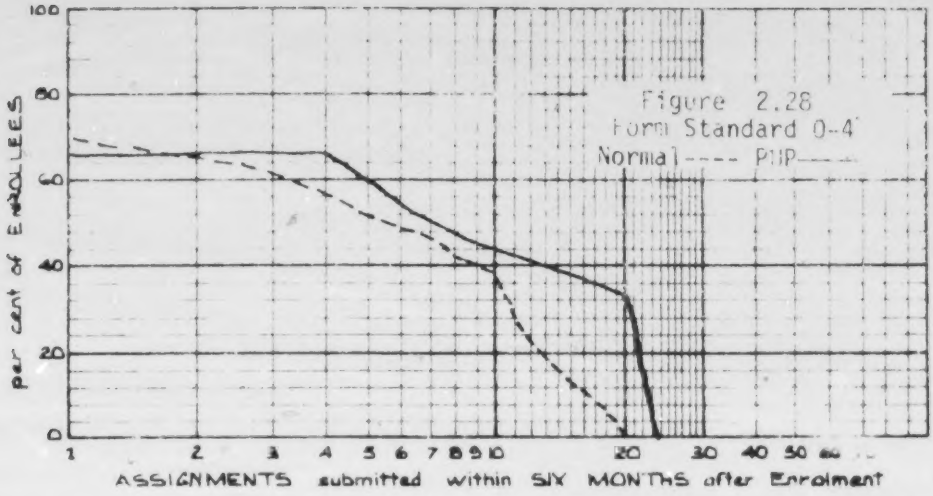


Figure 2.28
Form Standard 0-4
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

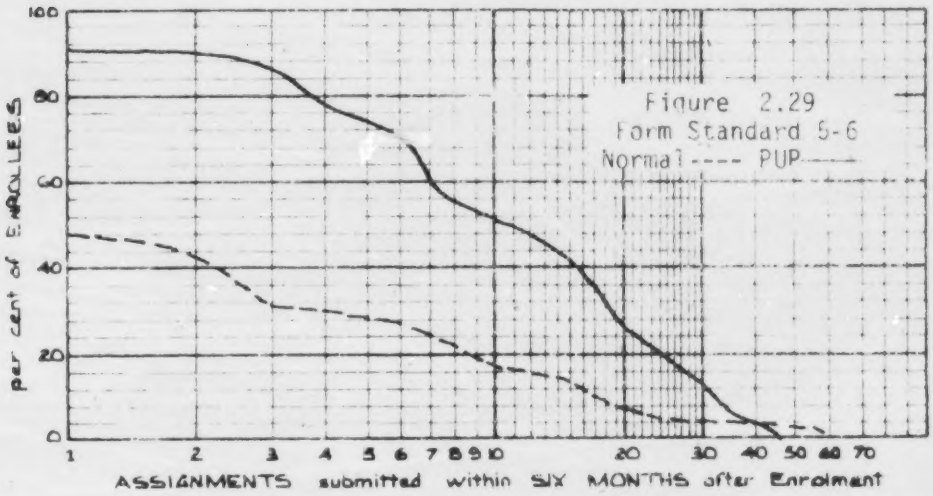


Figure 2.29
Form Standard 5-6
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

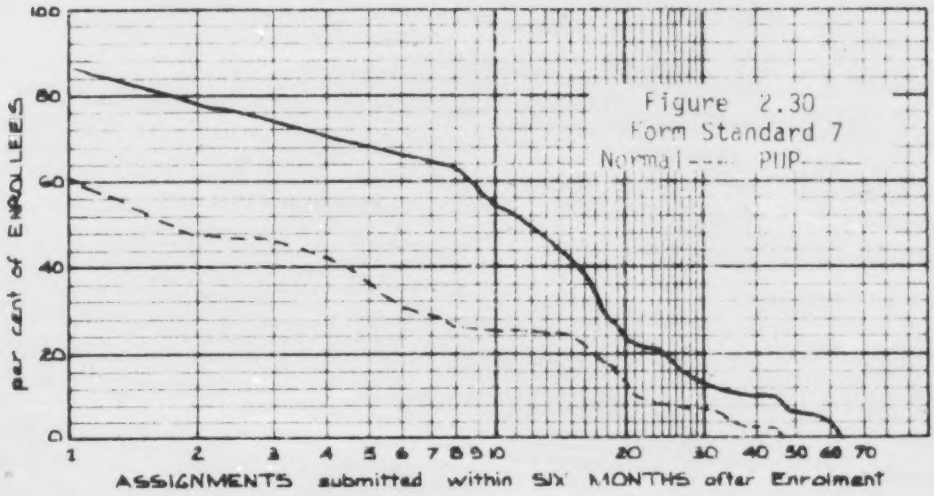
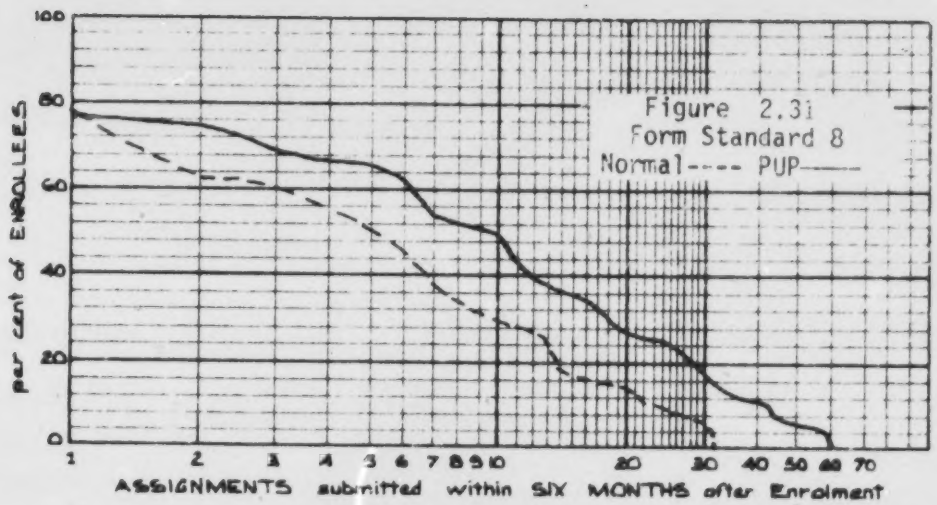
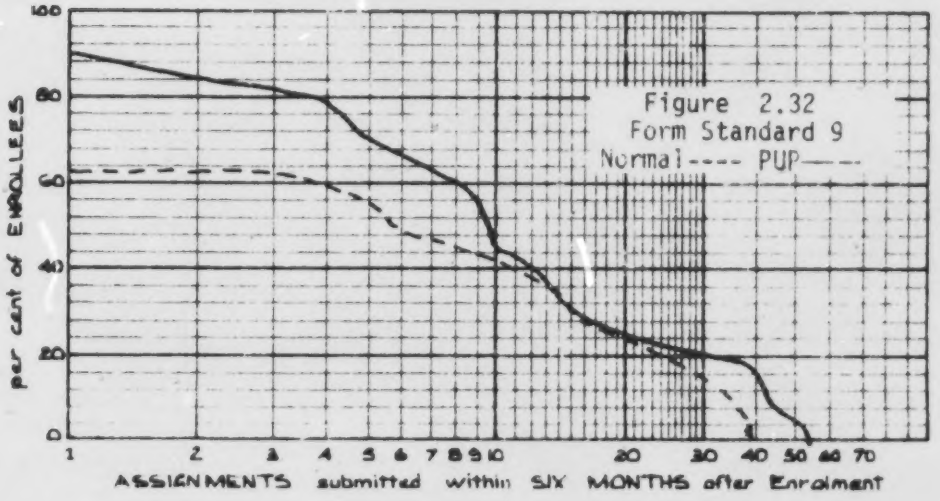


Figure 2.30
Form Standard 7
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment


per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment
Figure 2.31
Form Standard 8
Normal---- PUP——


per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment
Figure 2.32
Form Standard 9
Normal---- PUP——

Figures 2.29 through 2.32. This variable is, then, only mildly predictive at the lower end of the scale. It is recommended that enrolment forms which are very carelessly completed, when causing difficulty at any enrolment "stop", be taken off the enrolment production line, and applicants be sent a standard letter inviting them to discuss their enrolment in person or by phone with the Student Counsellor.

Whilst the quality of completion of an enrolment form is normally considered to be an entry variable, standardization was attempted through the covering leaflet in the PUP. This leaflet stressed the importance of its proper completion and gave reasons for some of the detail required. It was expected that this leaflet would result in a higher completion standard. As will be observed from the following table, there was only a slight improvement, reflected in an appreciable reduction of the small "worst" category, and some improvement in the "very best" group proportion. There was very little shift with all between these extremes.

/From the

Form Standard	Normal	PUP
	%	%
0-4	14	5
5-6	27	23
7	27	29
8	23	27
9	9	16
	100	100

From the clerical aspect, forms of standard seven and above are easy to handle and do not "throw" inexperienced staff. As the proportion beneath that level were only reduced from forty-one per cent (41%) to twenty-eight per cent (28%), it is doubtful whether the leaflet was justified. Only thirteen per cent (13%) were affected to any worthwhile extent, at the cost of eighty-two per cent (82%) reading it and, presumably, thirteen per cent (13%) taking additional care which was wasted.

Perhaps applicants expect some guidance in filling in a complex form even if they do not really need help. This could be an area where it would be

/preferable

preferable to tender help for those who want it, but to play down the autocratic attitude of "This Is What You Must Do".

Sex

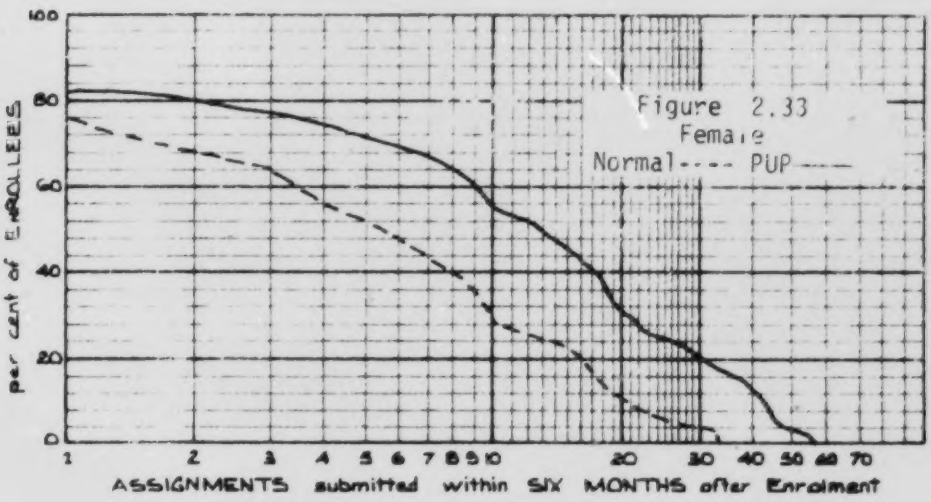
Does an external student's sex, and all it entails (environment, orientation, self-perception, and etc.), have any bearing on performance?

Donehower (1968. p.5) found staggering differences between the performance of women and men correspondence students of the University of Nevada. She quotes seventy per cent (70%) of the women, contrasted with forty-seven per cent (47%) of the men, completing their courses. (She also reported better performance, including twice the pace, of teacher-certification students. It could be that this group had a far higher proportion of female students.) She suggests (p.20) that this difference could be due to girls having fewer reading difficulties and working harder to win favour in their adolescent years.

Figures 2.35 and 2.36 tell an interesting story.

/There was

There was a clearly better performance by the females; not nearly as extreme as reported by Donehower, but, nonetheless, definite. The PUP had hardly any effect on the female non-starter group which was very low for Normals. As will be seen in Figure 2.33, the PUP appeared to dramatically reduce the high drop-out rate. The reverse was true of the males (Figure 2.34). The Normals had a high non-starter proportion, but their starters held better than the PUPs.



/My previous

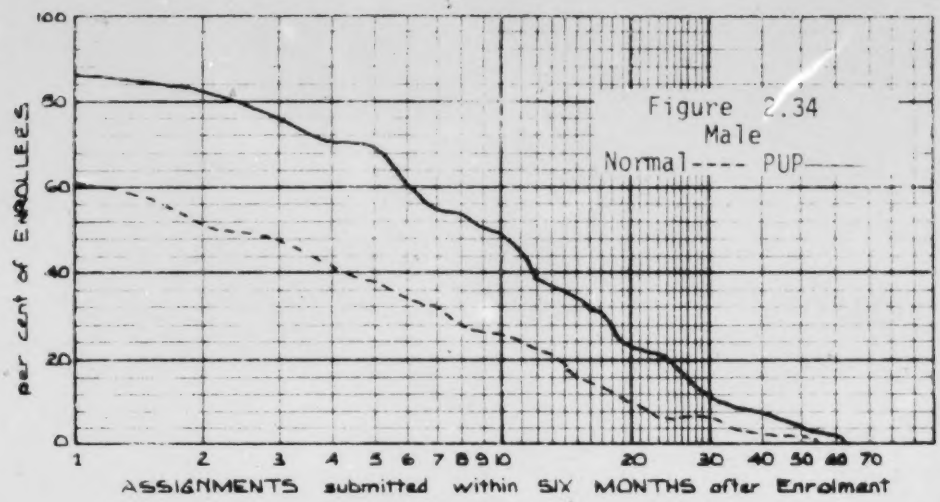


Figure 2.34
Male
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

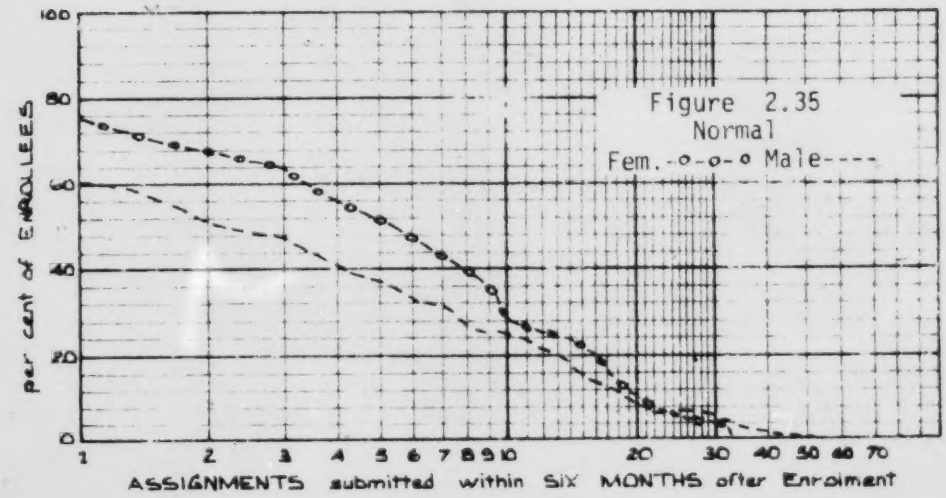


Figure 2.35
Normal
Fem. -o-o-o Male----
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

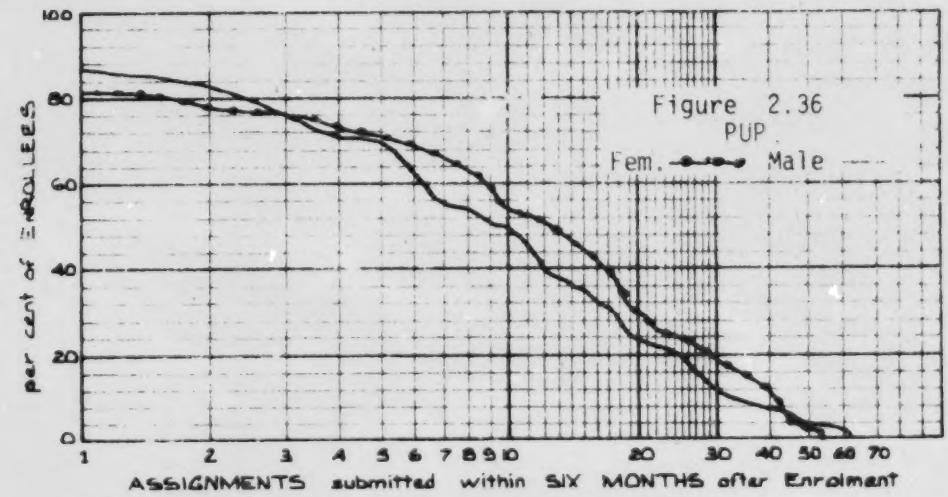


Figure 2.36
PUP
Fem. Male ---
per cent of ENROLLEES
0
20
40
60
80
100
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

My previous experience had been that female students had generated twice as many administrative queries, per head, as did the males. However, during inspection of the files of those in the sample, I found that this was not the case with the female PUPs. I believe that females should be encouraged to enrol and be informed of the success of female students generally, to build their confidence and to remove, what must be, added isolation from being a minority group in most courses.

Whilst females should be encouraged to use the external mode, their performance is not so much better than that of the males as to warrant using applicant's sex as an attrition predictor.

Educational Level

It might be regarded as common sense that the higher the proven educational level of a student, the greater would be his ability to cope with a correspondence course. When teachers and institutions have the opportunity to select and reject applicants, academic attainment is either the sole, or a major,

/determinant

determinant in selection. It would be very convenient if this attitude was justifiable.

The comparative curves in Figures 2.37 through 2.42 clearly show that the highest wastage occurred where enrollees' post-primary education exceeded seven years' equivalent full-time study, whilst the least wastage was from the group who had benefited from less than four years' post-primary schooling. Contrary to expectations, no more than three years separated the average age of the two groups. The curves of Figure 2.42 do not support the contention that the course material or teaching standard did not meet the aspirations and expectations of the more-educated groups. It must be conceded that the numbers in the groups were small, but similar findings are not uncommon.

The Pedrinis (1972) considered that first year wastage rates in excess of fifty per cent (50%) in some American colleges operating under an open admission policy is partly due to entering students not having the "basic skills necessary to facilitate /learning."

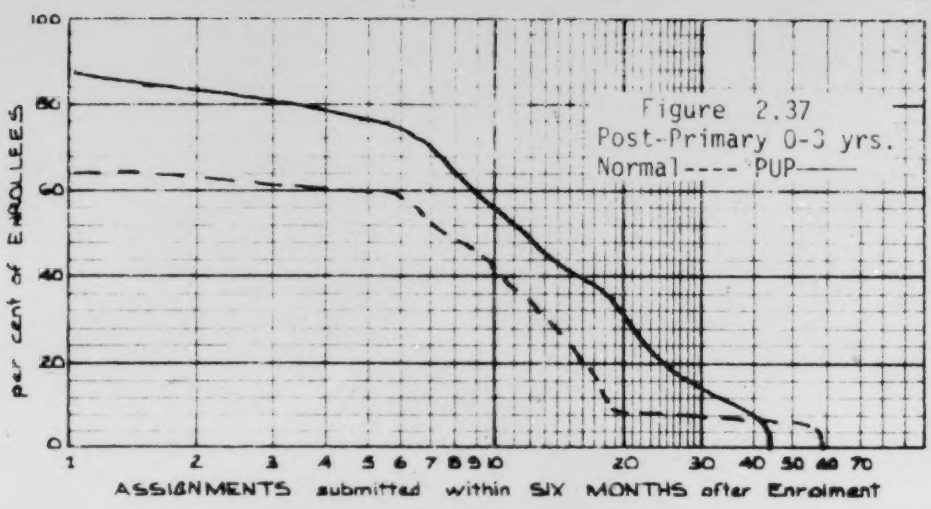


Figure 2.37
Post-Primary 0-3 yrs.
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

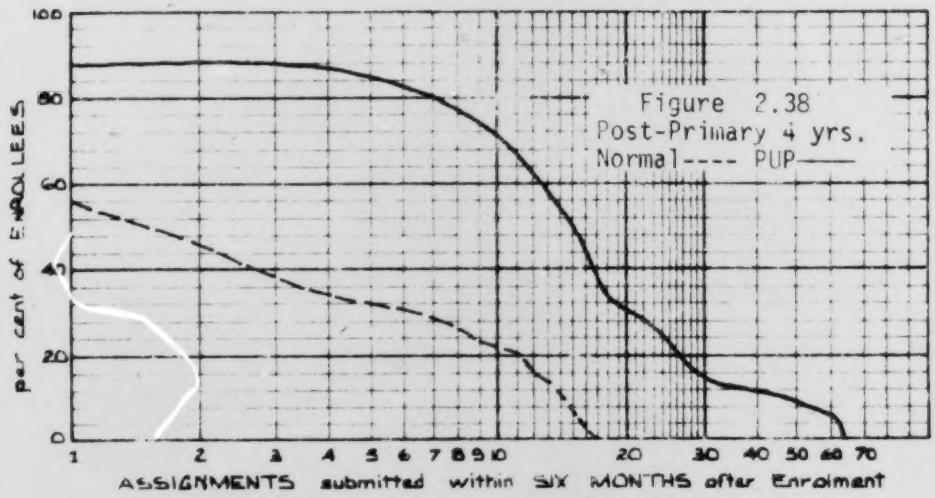


Figure 2.38
Post-Primary 4 yrs.
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

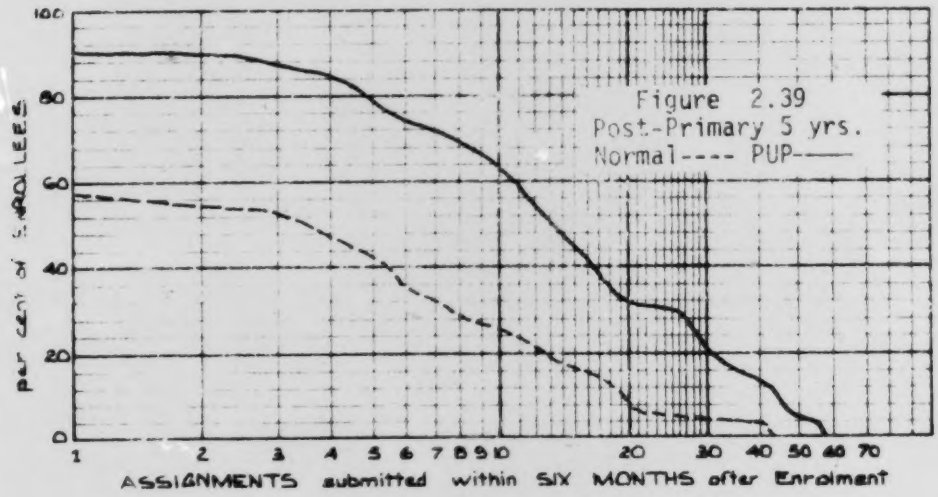


Figure 2.39
Post-Primary 5 yrs.
Normal---- PUP——
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

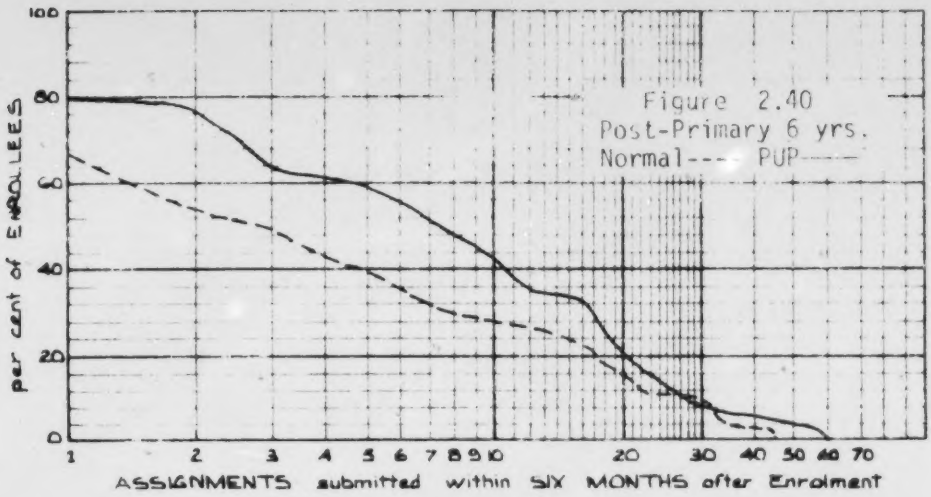


Figure 2.40
Post-Primary 6 yrs.
Normal--- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

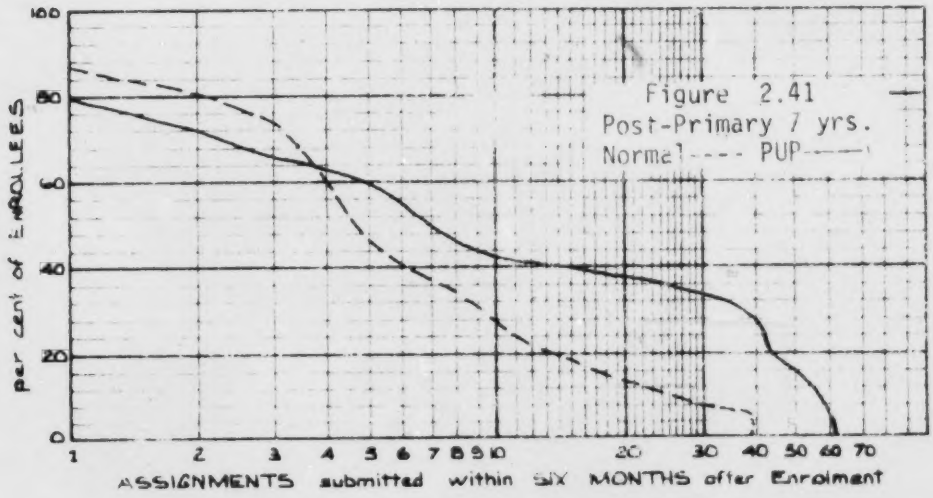


Figure 2.41
Post-Primary 7 yrs.
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

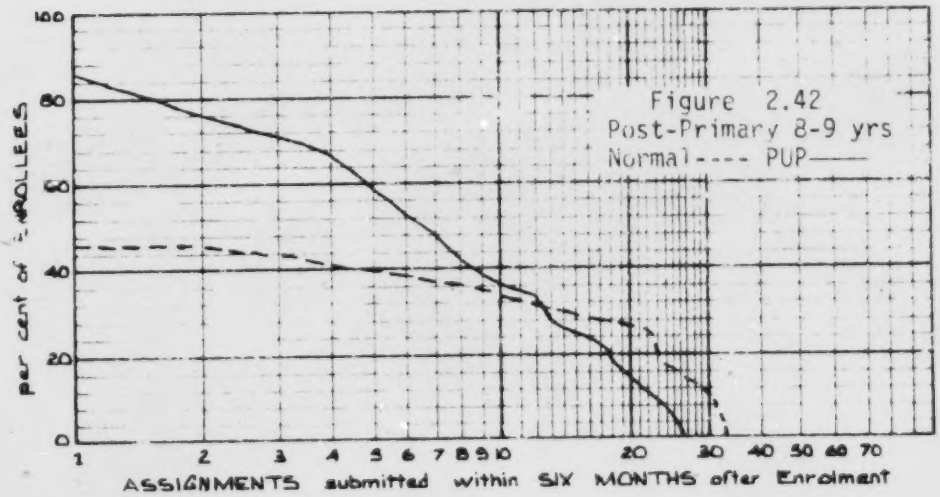


Figure 2.42
Post-Primary 8-9 yrs
Normal---- PUP——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

learning". Perhaps the lack was less one of basic skills so much as incentive and competition, as Eagle (1973, p.6) found that remedial courses in English and Mathematics had no significant effect upon the tendency to drop out from community colleges.

Lee (1975) found that although students transferring from other community colleges had higher grade point averages than the native community, their attrition rate was no lower. The large-sample study of Losak and Lin (1973, pp.129-130) showed that there was no significant difference in performance of students admitted to advanced courses based upon (CLEP) entry examination offered regardless of formal education, and those who had followed the traditional path of basic courses.

After an attrition (at the level of 57%) study at a Californian Community College, Lee and West (1974) found that the grade point averages of drop-outs after one semester were higher than those who persisted. At least at that College, the natural selection argument was refuted.

/Nicholson

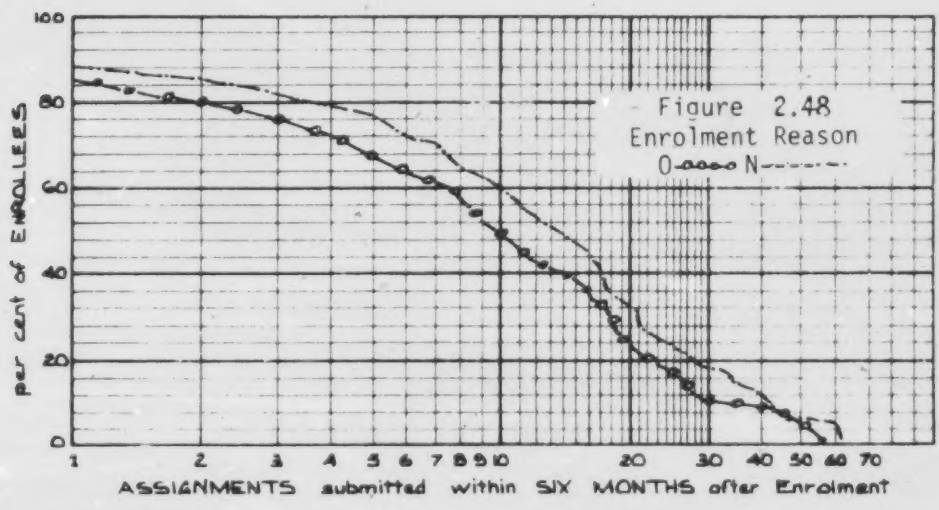
Nicholson (1973, p.5) in his survey of drop-out from American colleges summed up by dismissing academic variables as predictors of either retention or wastage, even though those variables were valuable for distinguishing future honours graduates. In support, he referred to the studies of Rose and Felton (1966), Heist (1968), Savicki et al. (1970) and his own of 1970 and 1971.

It should be remembered that the courses involved in the sample did not demand a very high level of mathematical or scientific knowledge or ability, and that students were gaining (except in the course 0649) concurrent tuition in an English Expression subject. Nevertheless, without drawing excessive inference from the data and previous studies, it can be stated that level of prior educational attainment is not an effective predictor of non-starting or drop-out, although care should be exercised in enrolling those who may have been worn out by post-secondary education (Figure 2.42).

/Stated

Stated Reason for Enrolment

The type of reason, occupational or other, advanced for enrolment is not a significant predictor (see Figure 2.48 below). Attempting to grade the sense and perception displayed by the reasons was unsuccessful in prediction of attrition, as shown by Figures 2.49 through 2.54. Admittedly the answers to Preliminary Unit Question 1.1, "In a few words please let us know your expectations from successfully completing your correspondence course", were brief. Most were of a length of six lines. It is doubtful, though, whether a longer essay response would have revealed more.



/Glatter

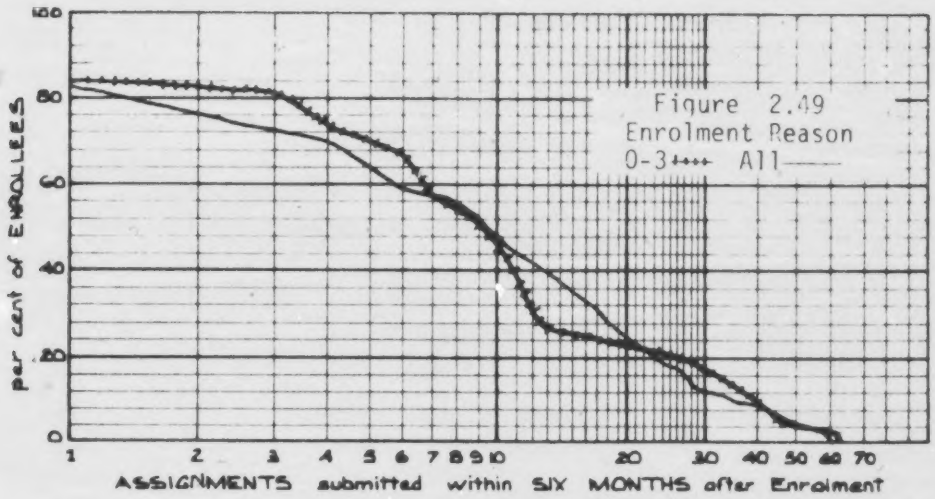


Figure 2.49
Enrolment Reason
0-3 ++++ All ——
per cent of ENROLLEES
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80
60
40
20
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

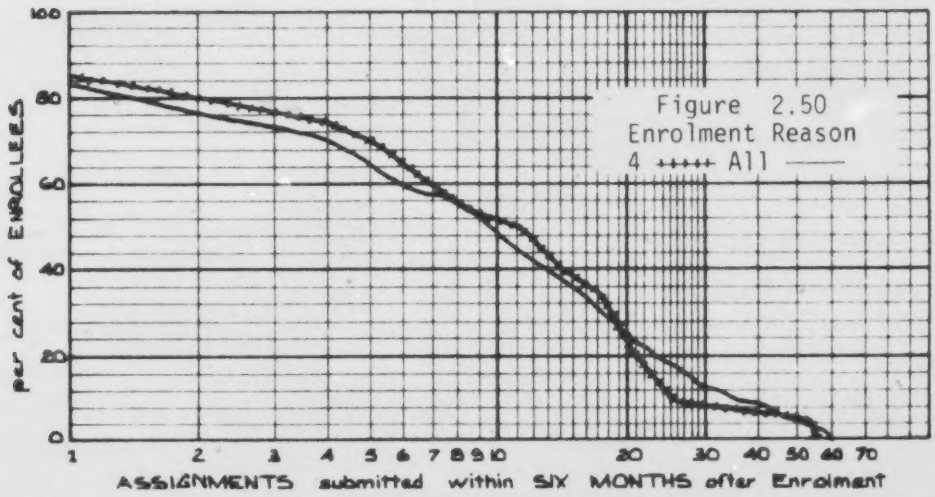
Figure 2.50
Enrolment Reason
4 +++++ All ——
per cent of ENROLLEES
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

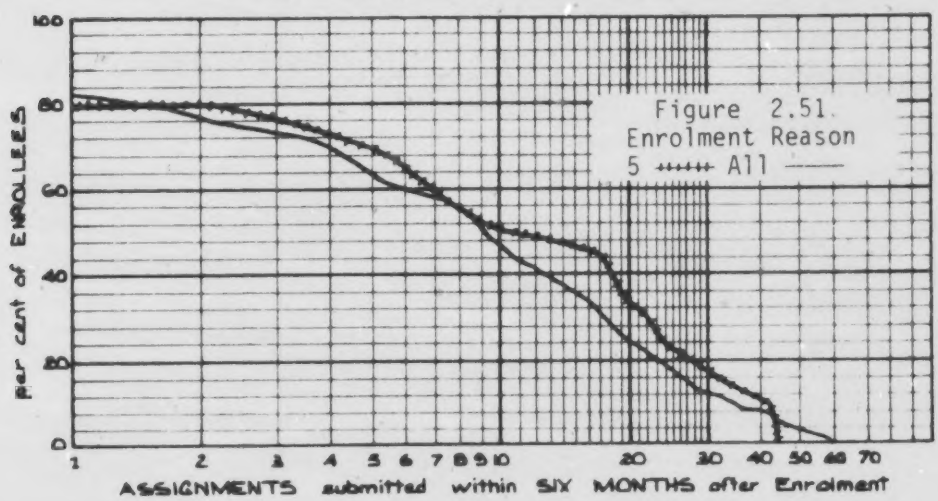
Figure 2.51
Enrolment Reason
5 ++++++ All ——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

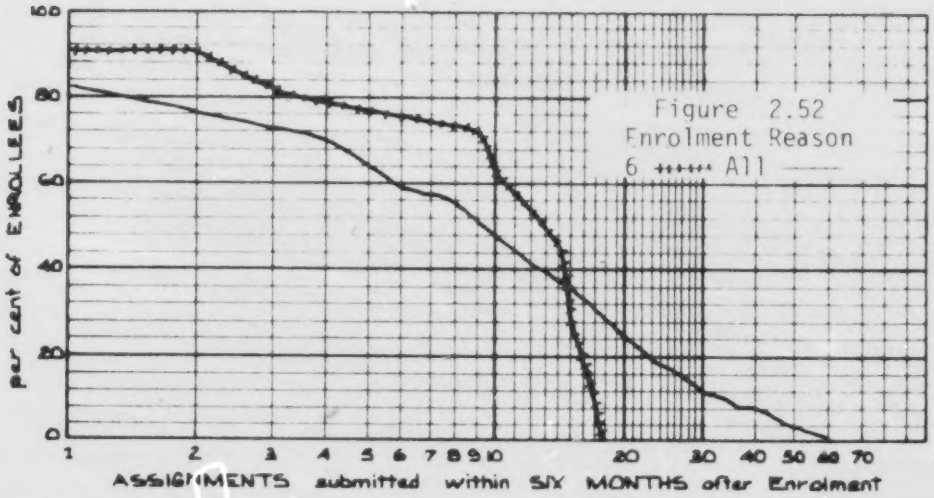
Figure 2.52
Enrolment Reason
6 +++++ All ——
per cent of ENROLLEES
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

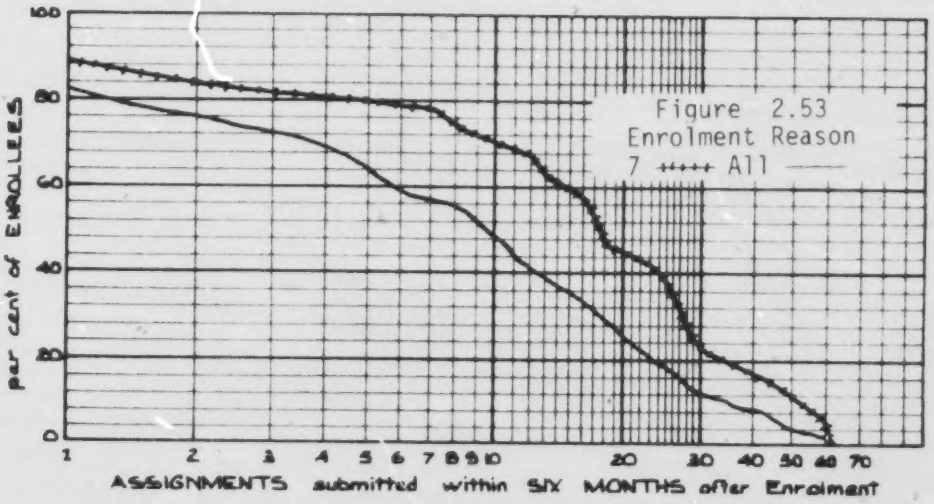
Figure 2.53
Enrolment Reason
7 +++++ All ——
per cent of ENROLLEES
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

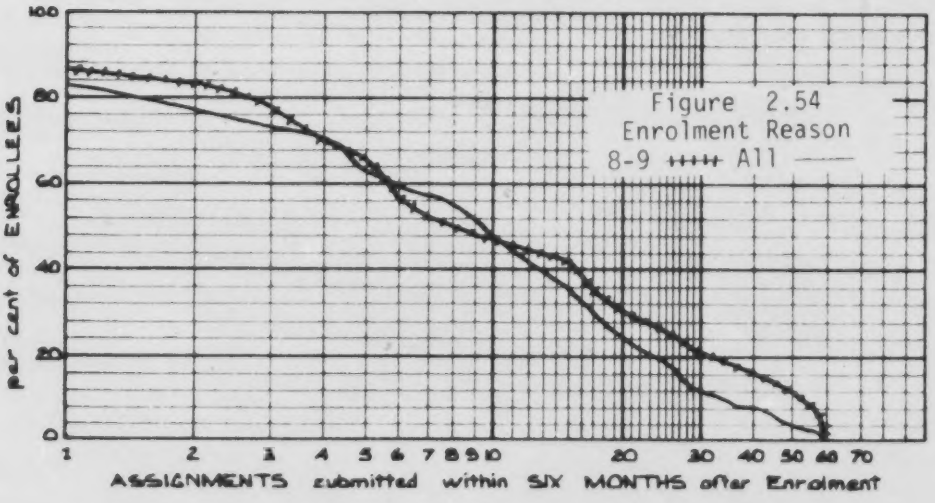
Figure 2.54
Enrolment Reason
8-9 +++++ All ——
per cent of ENROLLEES
100
80
60
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0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
ASSIGNMENTS submitted within SIX MONTHS after Enrolment

Glatter (1969, p.95) notes that S.G.D., West Germany, (with 14,000 working students) "consider the principal cause of dropout to lie in students' over-optimistic assessment of their potential ... (and) family, social and health reasons are considered secondary". Research evidence elsewhere does not support this view. Glatter refers to a study in Holland finding that "dropouts had vaguer goals". The present study shows no significant difference in the performance of those with the vaguest and of those with the most logical reasons for enrolment.

Course Load

Bhatnagar's (1975) study showed a higher proportion of drop-outs among those who enrolled for the minimum amount of course work. Brawer (1971, p.10) also found that dropouts tended to have enrolled for a lighter study load than had persisters. The data in the Appendix has not been arranged to test these findings. A crude check of enrollees in 0549, the course with the lightest load compared with the rest does not show any dramatic difference. Applicants invariably chose to enrol for the full stage-

/load

load, possibly because they thought it was expected of them. Where light loads are shown in the data, this generally has been because of exemptions or oral class-time clashes resulting in mixed modes of study without formal transfer from other colleges.

It would appear that a careful balance should be struck between under-loading and over-loading the student, but it is doubtful if the institution's student counsellors or teachers are the best judges of this for any individual. Perhaps, their concern should be with adequately informing applicants of the likely time-cost to the "average student".

At the University of Kentucky, Sloan (1965) found the major reason for correspondence withdrawal was given as "lack of time" and recommended that "provision be made for time extensions". In a free-pacing system this "cure" already exists. What is needed is to stretch time. Those who take on a heavy load and succeed do this, but personality tests such as the six studies referred to by Bhatnagar (1975, p.163) have not been successful in identifying the

/"significant

"significant personality and attitudinal differences" to predict the drop-outs. Perhaps energy should be directed to identifying the time-stretchers and aiding them to even greater success.

Life Change

Lightfield (1974) found that a significant proportion of community college attrition was due to change in personal plans "rather than due to failure of the student or college". Roesler's 1971 attrition study, based on questionnaires, found that family and personal reasons were the most common and most important reasons given for withdrawal.

Garry's (1975) study established that there was a significant relationship between the amount of life change in adult students and the frequency of their drop-out behaviour. At first glance, "dropouts ... had experienced significantly more life change than non-dropouts" appears to say nothing unexpected; after all, anyone who has ploughed through thousands of students' advanced reasons for withdrawal knows that most give life change, such as of health,

/occupation,

occupation, employer, home or marital status, as the prime reason.

What is significant, I think, in Garry's study is that the drop-outs not only claim to have experienced life change, but actually have, whilst the persisters have not, to anything like the same extent. Gell (1965) had also found this to be so. So much for the theory that persisters are strong and have resisted temptations that drop-outs have succumbed to. If what happens to students after enrolment is unrelated to the institution itself, there is little it can do to either predict or prevent drop-out. Its function would then be limited to reduction of the non-starter and withdrawal after examination (pass or failure) rates.

Pessimistic Conclusion

Whilst something can be done to reduce the non-starter proportion, and something should be done to lift and encourage candidates during the emotional let-down time immediately following the examination period, it appears as if little can be done to

/identify

identify the drop-out in time to help him. The major cause seems to be life change. Life change is such an urgent and demanding affair that it is unlikely that the student undergoing it is likely to even remember his correspondence course, let alone seek the help of the institution. Perhaps the best that can be done is to continue to reiterate the message, "You can return without loss of credits", in that simple form, to students where the institution can cope with true self-pacing.

The history of drop-out prediction has not been good, and there are no signs of improvement. Many writers confirm this. Eagle (1973) in his New York study found no significant correlation between any one of many entry variables and the tendency to drop-out after one semester of college. Jones and Dennison (1972, p.71) concluded that "the non-persister was not characterized by any significant measurable differences from the persister". Garry (1975, p.24) noted, "dropout prediction scales for adults have had only a very limited amount of success, and have not had a wide application". Essex and

/Anderson

Anderson concluded that:

(a) type of assistance,

(b) course level,

(c) number of lessons in the course,

(d) hours of course credit, and

(e) educational level,

"did not account for any criterion variance" and "it does not appear that these variables are useful predictors of success in a correspondence course".

Chapter 8: POSSIBLE "CURES" FOR ATTRITION

Introduction

The PUP worked. Why it did can only be speculated upon. In an attempt to determine some possible reasons, it is worth considering some of the more popular suggested remedies for reducing attrition. Those which will be considered are:

Counselling
Learning Material
Residential Centres
Pace.

Whilst there are, without doubt, many other possibilities which deserve attention, they are of the philosophical type which does not point to means of implementation.

Counselling

Counselling is often offered as the panacea for all attrition ills. This may be so to an extent, but has the method of counselling external students been described in any detail? Only a minute proportion of full-time students avail themselves of the

/specialist

specialist counselling services of their institution. Even fewer part-time students partake. Local evidence suggests that merely informing correspondence students of the existence of a student counselling service is not enough to generate many demands for help.

Thurston (1973, pp.66-67) in relation to drop-out says, "All of the research conducted to date in this area indicates that the phenomenon we are dealing with is complex and involves the interaction of students with peers, family, faculty members, administrative policies and procedures, and the environmental press of the college." She listed nine types of pressure discerned in non-persisting students. Only one of these, financial burdens, was external to the individual; the remainder were inner emotional or mental. All of these pressures come within territory claimed by student counsellors.

If the main causes of drop-out are personal rather than institutional, and this appears to be the case,

/counselling

counselling by trained and experienced psychologists conversant with the demands of correspondence education would appear to be vital in drop-out prevention. The implementation and administration of such a policy could be difficult if not impossible at any reasonable level of effectiveness. There do not appear to be any reports, of an empirical nature, of successful pre-exit counselling of part-time, let alone external, students. If there is no discernible way of directing effective help to drop-outs when they most need it, it must be proffered before needed and to those who may not need it.

In the correspondence situation, because of the geographic dispersion of students, counselling inevitably relies heavily on the written word. Face-to-face counselling is usually even more expensive to the student than it is to the institution. The telephone is the major vehicle for individualized counselling, but it leads to the greatest misinterpretation and confusion unless there is confirmation in written form.

Counselling could be considered under three /headings:

headings:

1. Pre-enrolment counselling,
2. Pre-examination counselling, and
3. Counselling at time of need.

Perhaps, some justification for "pre-examination counselling" is called for. There appear to be a number of students, who satisfactorily meet assignment submission and standard requirements, but who, without explanation, fail to apply for and/or attempt scheduled examinations. This group could be seen as a preventable loss to the institution and to society.

In considering pre-enrolment counselling, there are two questions to be considered. Should counselling involve selection? Should it be used in conjunction with testing? A pragmatic answer to these questions would be, "Whatever is successful!" McIntosh describes the Open University practice of interviewing applicants where possible as being, "in order to counsel, but not to select", selection being based upon questionnaires. Although pre-enrolment testing (described by Thurston, 1973) could perhaps identify one-half of non-persisters at the expense of only one-tenth of persisters,

/applicants

applicants may be able to pretest themselves. Again, this would be at the expense of the less-confident persisters who would wipe themselves off. The ideal appears to lie in counselling - to reveal as much "truth" as can be discerned about the courses, performance, demands and about the individual himself.

Harter's (1969) findings suggest that drop-out could have been avoided by more careful planning by enrollees which, in turn, could have been assisted by pre-enrolment counselling. An obvious group which one would think would be helped by such counselling are the non-starters. It is reasonable to assume that a sizeable proportion of them do not start because the learning material sent to them after enrolment gives them sufficient information to evaluate their enrolled course of study in terms of their individual needs and priorities. Surely such information should be given to them prior to enrolment?

In referring to drop-outs, Freeman (1975, p.32) said,

> These people have clearly wanted to start a course.

/We have

> We have a duty to try and provide the course they want, although satisfying this need depends on us knowing what they want which is in turn dependent on them knowing what they want.

To quote from the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1973, p.14), "Do the right people have good enough information to make the right decisions under the right circumstances for the right reasons?" Anderson (1972, p.35) refers to studies showing, "Up to 20 per cent of entering students ... clearly have no positive reasons for being in their particular course and no strong ambition for any particular course or career."

What form, then, should pre-enrolment counselling take? Heath (1973, p.8) recommended that "entering students shold be counselled prior to initial enrolment about occupational interests and curriculum program needs."

Vest and Spino (1975) contend that students are often confused by duplicated counselling programmes

/which often

which often provide conflicting information at considerable cost. Not only are there these formal counselling programmes, there is usually a gush of helpful advice offered by employers, relatives and friends. This advice is often based upon personal or second-hand experience of individuals and is rarely of help. So far as possible, pre-enrolment counselling should be based upon fact, as to drop-out rates, failure rates and the like. An applicant is likely to be receiving so much advice from so many quarters that even more, no matter how well-intentioned, and no matter how qualified or experienced the adviser, merely adds to the applicant's confusion. Mass counselling should be based on fact, but individualized counselling can include help in sifting through advice already received, and helping the applicant to truly perceive his own needs, abilities, and time-resources. He should be made aware of the minimum cost (in time) he must incur, as well as what is known of the average time-cost to past successful students of the institution studying the course chosen by the applicant.

/If it

If it is considered that a student is entitled to know, prior to his commencement of work, the method of assessment, the extent and depth of coverage expected, and the standard required as measured by past and anticipated success and failure rates, this information should form part of pre-enrolment counselling. If it has not, as much as is known and can be disclosed (within the limits of institutional security policy) should be disclosed to all students as early as can be.

One form of effective counselling which is so often ignored in the preparation of examination candidates is what I like to refer to as "gentling"; the breaking-in, with firmness yet kindness, to the testing process. A candidate needs to feel confident without being cocksure, calm but not placidly in the doldrums, and secure that the testing will be just in the final analysis. There are very few students, in my experience, who can be that way without help. Some institutions can give a written guarantee of honest review of all failures. If they can, they should. Where this is not possible, and

/there is

there is an avenue for review in some cases, all students should be aware of that avenue and its conditions. Calm confidence can be achieved to a large extent by certainty of knowledge as to standards. What is often forgotten is that students attending classes can be reasonably sure that their fellows do not have more knowledge as to what precisely is being tested than they, themselves, do. An external student cannot be so confidently sure unless he is informed in a non-individualized way of as much detail as is possible without breaching security of test instruments.

Counselling at the time of need is highly, and possibly even exclusively, individualized. What could be more important than the help that is given is the security of knowing that there is help available if needed. Generally students are realistic and they do not believe in fairy tales. Frankness and honesty are vital if there is to be credibility. The Wayside Chapel, at Kings Cross, uses a very effective technique in fund-raising. It circularizes not only details of its successes but also its failures. A

/similar

similar approach could be used effectively in publicizing all the many forms of counselling of students.

Learning Material

The lavish multi-media productions of the Open University have, apparently, sparked a rash of enthusiasm by educationists to improve the quality of external learning material provided by institutions. At the other end of the spectrum Ormond Simpson (1976) puts "A Case for Coarser Courses". The major difficulty, of course, lies in defining quality. It should be realised that the student is the consumer. What helps him should be the measure, rather than what is attractive and ego-boosting to the writers.

Very often it is assumed that self-contained learning material must be more helpful to the student than briefer study-guides to text books. Why correspondence writers and editors should assume that their work is of a higher quality than internationally accepted texts is hard to comprehend. If too much detail is spelled out, major points are seldom stressed.

/If attrition

If attrition is taken as a measure of quality, it would appear from a number of studies, that quality of lesson material is not important above a minimum standard. Gold (1972, p.10) found that, "Few Law drop-outs indicated dissatisfaction with the course as presented." Also, in Harter's (1969) survey, students spoke favourably about not only the lesson material but also of the correspondence method itself. (They were less kindly disposed towards their instructors.) Anderson and Tippy's (1971) study reveals that sixty-four per cent of withdrawing correspondence students rated their courses "Interesting" or "Very Interesting".

Five years ago the College of External Studies abandoned attractive multi-coloured covers on lesson units after a four-year trial. Feedback from students and drop-outs indicated that they had not made a scrap of difference. Some students suggested that they had hidden them from friends and employers as they did not "look serious enough".

Of the eight courses in the PUP sample, none

/contains

contains much learning material which is exciting, because of the narrow boundaries of the subject syllabuses. I ranked them from one through eight on the basis of my own feelings as to the interest they would be likely to hold for the student. Referring to the attrition patterns shown in Figures 1.14 through 1.21 (pp.~~93-9~~), my rankings were rearranged to 6, 1, 2, 5, 8, 7, 4, and 3 (most attrition). If I am to retain any respect for my judgement, I must conclude that the "quality" does not have an effect on attrition.

Further reference to those Figures (1.14-1.21) shows non-starter rates ranging from twenty-three per cent (23%) to forty per cent (40%). When it is remembered that all these non-starters (except those enrolled in 0649 Auctioneers and Agents) received the same pack of initial lesson material (1900A Business Communication, a subject common to all), it seems clear that the standard of material had no effect on overcoming the initial inertia of non-starters.

What about throwing in a liberal dose of audio-visual material; that should liven things up? This

/does not

does not seem to work either.

The Council of Europe (1971, p.4) quotes a Soviet Minister for higher and intermediate specialist training as stating that although education by television in the Soviet originated in the thirties, and is currently being used to an extent unheard of elsewhere, "these students are less successful in their assimilation than the others, and this situation may be expected to continue." This further supports the contention that the quality of correspondence lesson material and its method of transmission are not significant factors in the learning and retention process.

Crowley (1973, p.100) visited local study centres of the Open University and reported that "two-thirds of the way through the university year very few if any of the students were following the (television and radio) broadcasts ... they found it much more profitable for the type of intensive study required to work on their correspondence material".

/Lawson

Lawson (1974,p.1) in referring to the Australian Committee on Open University summed up, "The Committee wisely sees the written word as being the fundamental and irreplaceable medium of future tertiary educational programmes." If secondary schools continue to stress other media of communication, perhaps it will be necessary for correspondence institutions to institute bridging courses in reading and written communication.

In summing up, it could be considered that there is unlikely to be discovery of a formula of the mix of different types of learning material for effectiveness. I am not suggesting any resistance to experimentation; rather, that the most effective medium, of getting a message through or triggering original thought, should be selected continually and tested. Too often a medium is chosen or rejected because of equipment (or other resources) being available readily, or unavailable without effort.

Residential Sessions

Intensive live-in periods on campus can give

/a number

a number of benefits. Possibly the major one is the opportunity given to share common problems with fellow students and to test ideas and share work experiences with them. The lack of interchange with peers is a decided disadvantage of the correspondence mode. Other benefits depend upon the efficiency and degree of structuring of the intensive session by the institution. At best, there can be the opportunity of exposure to specialists, rare equipment, and single-copy learning material, as well as to debate and vivid experience.

The correspondence institution should not ignore the non-financial cost to students. Not only do they reasonably want the costs to be balanced by benefits, they want those benefits to be given in a compressed manner. If the institution is not prepared to pay the price by efficient structuring of these sessions, it should not even consider making attendance compulsory.

Bewley's (1970, pp.16-17) contention that compulsory attendance at vacation courses boost and sustain

/students

students is unsupported by any research evidence. Whilst not denying that benefits accrue from intensive residential on-campus attendances, rarely do attenders comment that these are sufficiently intensive to warrant the time-cost. Conductors of such residentials, upon retiring to their nuptial beds, may perhaps concede that the day-time disruption to their students' lives may be as great as their own, but it is doubtful if they consider the emotional ruptures of students being separated from their families.

Compulsory residentials could be said to stem from old attitudes of independent study being inferior to residential instruction. Brenden (1975, p.10) points to these attitudes "being reexamined in the light of studies indicating no significant differences between the two methods of instruction".

When there is no compulsion only a small proportion attend, and then largely on a "drop-in drop-out" basis. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. The problem could lie with institutions not being prepared to accept such a rebuff.

/Alford

Alford (1968, p.118) refers, in his book on residential centres, to "help" weekends for correspondence students of the University of Oklahoma. This suggests individual problem-solving rather than the structured schools which are normally conducted. The resources of an institution could, perhaps, be more effectively applied to catering for informal very brief help sessions (one-to-one tutorials) than to attempt to mount more lavish extended residential weeks.

Pace

Pace could be the key to success through correspondence study. There are indications that fast pace leads to success, not only in completion, but also in grade. Pfeiffer and Sabers (1970) found that the highest Grade Point Averages were earned by those correspondence students who completed in a very short time. Johnson (1974, pp.14-15) in a critical review of proprietary education in America found no difference between the achievement motive of their students compared with those of public education, but she did find that the former completed their studies much faster ("in a quarter or a half

/of the time

of the time it takes the public student to finish"). Possibly the prime reason for the faster performance was that private correspondence schools permit (if not encourage) students to progress at a fast pace. Confidence could be the factor in speedy commencement and completion.

Inertia of independent choice flourishes in a society of forced choice. Modern consumer society demands choice after choice after choice of its citizens; choice between specialist products, price, quantity and brands. Incessant compulsion to choose builds up antagonism to choice. When there is a choice between doing nothing or doing something, not only is there the inertia to action to overcome, there is the inertia to choosing. If the latter inertia is not overcome, nothing is done.

Harter (1969, p.7) in his study of New York external students discovered that thirty-four per cent of respondents did not submit any lessons before discontinuing. He did not comment beyond, "it appears critical to encourage students during their first

/stage

stage of study". He made no suggestions as to how to overcome this initial inertia. Donehower (1968, p.7) found that students who promptly submitted their first assignment were far less prone to dropping-out than were those who procrastinated.

It is reasonable to suppose that the fast starters achieved greater success not only because they were the type to "get on with it", but also because they could have been encouraged by evidence of progress on return of the corrected assignment. It could be folly to gamble that this was not so; special attention should be given to the fast turnaround of at least the first assignment. This could be assisted by designing the first assignment questions to enable easy correction and grading to give the teacher time to encourage by comments.

The data shows that students who were quick to commence submitting assignments were able to maintain that pace for the remainder of the year. Personally, I have been most successful with those correspondence courses which I flew through at the fastest pace.

/Eliasson

Eliasson (1968, p.59) quotes the Swedish Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs, Olof Palme, "In one month I rushed through a 25-assignment Latin course." Encouraging those students, who are able to cope, to work at their fastest pace may reduce drop-out from boredom. Toffler (1971, p.44) refers to those who "prefer to disengage, to idle at their own speed". Whilst self-paced correspondence study could be seen to hold considerable appeal to this group, their pace could be too slow for them ever to achieve the slightest degree of success, as measured by the rest of society.

One of the College's courses, "Principles and Techniques of Teaching for Part-Time Technical Teachers", has a single assignment for the first unit, a personal letter from the student detailing his background and particular problems he has encountered in teaching, and describing how, if at all, he was able to overcome them. It is sad to relate that this course has the highest non-starter rate and poor holding power, in spite of well-presented learning material, and experienced and devoted teachers. (Maybe the length of the course-

/title

title puts them off!) This could suggest that the first assignment should be straightforward to the extent that an enrollee knows precisely what is expected of him.

If working pace is a key to retention, in a self-pacing correspondence system it is difficult to see how an increase in lesson submission rates can be achieved. Brittain (1973, pp.6-7) points to such an increase with the introduction of CALS - Computer Assisted Lesson Service by the United States Armed Forces Institute. Whilst he speculates that this was due to the assignment format and prompter turn-around and greater feedback, he provides no opinion why the working pace did not increase with one course, introductory accounting.

Much is made of the personal relationship between the correspondence student and his tutor. It would be wonderful if it was true. Although no empirical evidence can be offered, perusal of thousands of marked scripts indicates that although many attempts are made by tutors, rarely do students respond to any appreciable

/extent.

extent. If overcoming initial inertia depends upon breaking of dependence ties, once overcome there is likely to be a degree of independence to prevent the formation of a close relationship with teachers.

Regardless of cause, if such a personal relationship does not exist, efficiency of assistance to self-learning must be the key. Given that, there is no reason to prevent the reallocation of a student from one teacher to another, given just cause. There could be grounds for reallocating students who indicate dependency tendencies to teachers who are expert in praising students and encouraging them to achieve more for more praise.

Similarly, administrative action could be taken to ensure that the independent student obtained prompt, efficient, and impersonal marking and correcting. The independent student, perhaps, could be identified by his perception of assignments as mere hurdles and barriers to completion, rather than as a teaching medium. Usually this is indicated by the shotgun-submission of multiple assignments.

/Whereas

Whereas an initial fast pace gives strong indication of success as a cure for attrition, a sizeable proportion of fast starters slow down for no apparent reason. If the reason could be traced to slow turnaround of their worked assignments, there could be merit in a system of linking fast starters with those teachers who have a good turnaround record.

Advice could be given to enrollees urging them to commence working and submitting assignments as soon as they possibly can. Learning material could be designed so that the early units were able to be dealt with quickly, without being too simple. So far as possible the early units should be self-contained, so that the enrollee is not delayed by the quest for a text book. Teachers could be encouraged to reinforce the advice to work speedily, and to award encouraging marks. All this could be done. It is recommended that action research be undertaken using different mixes of this "remedy" to test its validity.

/Summary

Summary

Mass counselling must, of necessity, be in written form and stress fact. So much as is possible should be given prior to enrolment. Applicants should be given certainty of knowledge as to institutional standards. Enrollees should have security in knowing that individualized counselling help is available to them whenever needed.

Again, it would appear that the written word will remain the fundamental method of communication in correspondence study, and that, above a minimum standard, quality of learning material has no effect upon non-starter rates. There is no evidence to suggest that such quality has any effect upon drop-out rates.

The intensity of residential sessions appears to be vital, if student attitudes are to be a guide.

Research into the effect of pace of study upon drop-out appears to hold out the greatest chance of success. Logic suggests that attrition will be reduced if encouragement can be effectively given

/to break

to break dependency ties and to overcome the initial inertia to commence. If a fast pace is developed very early, that pace usually continues if not hindered or prevented by the institution.

Chapter 9: CONCLUSION

I embarked on this study with the belief that all forms of attrition were bad; harmful and wasteful to the individual and to the institution. I am no longer so sure. It is so easy to over-react to the fallacious arguments advanced as to why it is not.

There are, I believe, some cases where attrition can be desirable to an institution; there is not anything intrinsically wrong with the completers being, in effect, financially subsidized by the drop-outs. I do not think a student should be bound to any course or institution. I do believe, however, that it is essential that the correspondence institution have a measure of control over the extent of each form of attrition. If it is a complete intangible there can be no effective planning to the detriment of the service which can be provided.

The following recommendations are coloured by those beliefs:

1. A series of precise definitions and a uniform /code of

code of attrition recording should be agreed upon and specified.

2. Correspondence institutions should ascertain the extent of their attrition, by non-starters, drop-outs, and failures.
3. Attempts should be made to explain variation in rates between courses and between consecutive time periods, and those explanations tested.
4. Tentative experimental steps to control attrition should be taken to reverse undesirable trends.
5. Wherever possible, attrition data should be exchanged between institutions. Preferably this data should be restricted to variation percentages and possible explanations.
6. Initiation appears to be a regulator of student commitment and, hence, of retention. When the latter is desirable, varying forms of initiation should be attempted and the results determined. When it is not desirable, formalities should be reduced and, again, the results determined.
7. Readily available life-change data, such as change of address, employer, or marital partner, and hospitalization should be collected and compared

/with

with drop-out data to determine any degree of correlation.

8. Those who pass or fail examinations should not be ignored. This is probably the only area where opinions should not be avoided. Questionnaires should be designed and distributed and results collated, preferably prior to examinations to enable prompt written counselling of failures.
9. Studies could be made in the realm of student uncertainty as to institutional requirements and extent of enforcement. Pace is another area which warrants further research.

These recommendations may appear prosaic and trifling being so concerned with collection of data. The reason for such concern is obvious; there is no comparative data available. Until there is, literature dealing with correspondence attrition will continue to be coloured by individual and limited experiences of writers, often deteriorating into wishful thinking.

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